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"WE'VE BEEN TO HELL AND BACK TO BRING YOU OUR COVER FEATURE"

There are a lot of now familiar trappings to the RPG genre, but the core of the experience isn't really loot, or spells, or even XP. Great role-playing games are about choice – the freedom to inhabit a character and do what you want to do in their world.

Few developers understand that like *Divinity Original Sin* creator Larian Studios, a developer so much in ascendance that they're almost in orbit. Its worlds are defined not by their lore, but by the grand scope of their interactivity. So how could we not be excited for its most ambitious project yet, *Baldur's Gate III*? So much so that we've been to hell and back to bring you our cover feature...

ROBIN VALENTINE
Specialist in
Dungeons, but not dragons

Twitter
@robinlvalentine

This month
Considered taking a level in a class with a more useful skillset.

ROBIN VALENTINE
PRINT EDITOR
robin.valentine@futurenet.com

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The PC Gamer team

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This month
Discovered that anyone can be a map marker clearing Ubisoft hero, if they put their mind to it.

WES FENLON
Specialist in
Bullseyeing womp rats

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This month
Discovered a hole in one of our articles that, if shot at, would blow up the entire magazine.

STEVEN MESSNER
Specialist in
Still playing MMOs in the year 2020

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@stevenmessner

This month
Made his bi-monthly pitch to get us all to try *Final Fantasy XIV*. No way, nerd!

RACHEL WATTS
Specialist in
Growing her own friends

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@rachel_wattts

This month
Got so into *Ooblets* she strapped a parsnip to her cat and tried to teach it to breakdance.

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Darktide swaps hordes of rats for Nurgle-worshipping cultists and pox-addled zombies.

THE X FACTOR

The XBOX SERIES X event was a great advert for Game Pass

The Xbox Games Showcase was as much a PC event as it was a showcase of what's coming to the Xbox Series X. Plenty of games were shown off that we'll soon get our hands on, and while Microsoft didn't make a great case for getting the new console, it definitely made a great one for Xbox Game Pass and its PC counterpart.

Microsoft gave us a look at five games from Xbox Games Studios and nine Xbox exclusives, and all of them will launch on Xbox Game Pass on day one. The subscription service will soon encompass three platforms and straddle two generations, and while we shouldn't expect complete parity between all platforms, it's likely we'll keep getting big first party titles on the PC version. Project xCloud is also being added to the Ultimate Game Pass package, letting players forget about platforms and download sizes and just stream their games.

MANY OF THE MOST EXCITING REVEALS CAME WITH ZERO DETAILS

When *Halo Infinite* launches, then, you'll get access straight away for the price of a subscription, which for new customers is £1/$1 for the first month, rising to £4/$5 for the subsequent months. If you subscribe for a year and exclusively play *Halo*, you'll still have saved money.

CHICKEN CHASER

Along with trailers for already announced games, including campaign footage for *Halo Infinite*, the showcase unveiled some surprises. OK, *Fable* wasn't a particularly big surprise, given the

CLOWNING AROUND

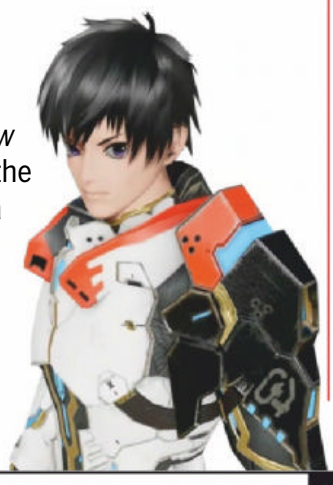
RED DEAD REDEMPTION 2

It turns out dressing up as a clown isn't just an effective way of scaring everyone at kid's birthday parties. Shortly after players slathered on goofy face paint in *Red Dead Online* to protest a lack of new stuff, the Naturalist update finally arrived, which includes a new career and Outlaw Pass. ■ ***HS***

PHINAL PHANTASY

NEW GENESIS

Phantasy Star Online 2 is getting a reboot called *New Genesis*, which should fix the jank that made the game a bit of a mess to play in its previous incarnation. Oddly *New Genesis* will run alongside *Phantasy Star Online 2*, but this free-to-play option will run in a new engine. ■ ***TS***



ROYALLY SCREWED

UBISOFT'S AVALON

According to reports from Bloomberg, in 2018 Ubisoft was working on an RPG set in Arthurian legend – *Avalon*, helmed by *Dragon Age* designer Mike Laidlaw. It was ultimately shut down by fantasy-disliking chief creative officer Serge Hascoët, and Laidlaw left shortly after. Oh, what might have been... ■ ***RV***

ABOVE, TOP: *Halo Infinite* was a bit underwhelming, but it does have a cool grappling gun.

ABOVE, BOTTOM: *Avowed* really should provide some protective gloves.

ABOVE, RIGHT: We don't know much about *Fable*, but hopefully this greedy toad is the star.

persistent rumours that Playground Games was at the helm. It's nice to have confirmation, of course, and it's being billed as a "new beginning" for the series. Otherwise, there's still a big question mark looming over it, with the teaser cinematic giving away next to nothing.

Obsidian's *Avowed* is in a similar situation. It was a genuine surprise, however, with the studio returning to the world of *Pillars of Eternity*, but this time with a first-person perspective. Unfortunately, this reveal was also absent gameplay and details.

Several promising third-party games also made an appearance. Fatshark, for instance, announced *Warhammer 40,000: Darktide*, taking *Vermintide*'s co-op melee fights and applying them to the grimdark 41st millennium. Unlike so many 40K games, *Darktide* is avoiding the low-hanging fruit of Space Marines and instead pitting a group of Inquisitor acolytes against a hive city that's been taken over by a Chaos cult.

While the showcase was billed as being all about the games, many of the most exciting reveals, including *Darktide*, came with zero details. It didn't really show off the next generation of games, it just teased them. Regardless, it still gives us all a lot to potentially look forward to on PC in the meantime.

Fraser Brown

Highs & Lows

HIGHS

The Witcher: Blood Origins
Netflix is making a Witcher prequel series set 1,200 years before Geralt was born.

Rocket League
Car football is going free-to-play via the Epic Games Store.

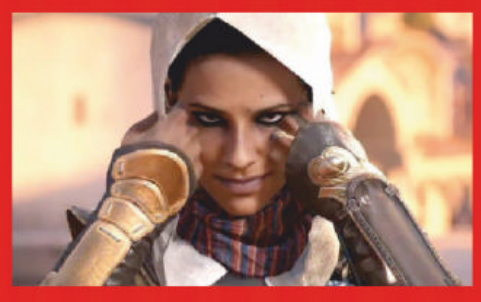
Minecraft
Players have unearthed the seed for the world from the title screen: 2151901553968352745

Twitch
The US Army started streaming on Twitch and violated the rules with a fake giveaway.

Half-Life 3
Before Valve settled on *Alyx*, it scrapped five Half-Life projects, including a *Half-Life 3*.

Assassin's Creed
Ubisoft sidelined *Assassin's Creed*'s female characters because former creative boss Serge Hascoët didn't think women would sell.

LOWS



The Spy

BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

THE SPY
The Spy has noticed you.

The camera pans over District 7 – an endless expanse of towering skyscrapers and indistinct lights. It falls sharply, down towards the enormous glass city, stopping on a rooftop where a shrouded figure sits hunched over a laptop. On the screen we see a meeting between two corporate suits in a nearby square. The figure watches – and listens – intently.

Overhead a drone spots the figure and beeps red in alarm, alerting the suits. They draw their guns as more drones swoop down to protect them. The figure sighs and launches from the rooftop, arcing in a graceful backflip and discarding the cloak shrouding their identity. MECHASPY lands effortlessly on the ground, poised for combat. All is still for the briefest moment, and then the ground erupts violently in a perfect circle around MECHASPY. (Note: this should look rad as hell.)

OK, look. There's not much happening right now, so The Spy has decided that it's time: The Spy is going to write a novel. Only, who actually *reads* novels any more? At this point Infinite Jest is more furniture than literature; a sort of cosmetic shorthand that identifies you as the kind of person who *would* read Infinite Jest, regardless of whether or not you actually have. "The interesting thing about Fight Club," you say, "is that in claiming that Jack's father left to start 'franchises' with other families, the *movie* does a better job of tying together the book's themes." And it's fine, nobody needs to know that you cribbed that opinion from the author's appearance on the DVD commentary track.

So, The Spy did some research into what the biggest cultural output of the 21st century is, and to write that instead. The Spy regrets to inform you that it's anime.

The Spy understands that you're reluctant to accept this, and that's fine. It just gives The Spy more time to finish drafting this semi-autobiographical series before the rest of the world catches up. But the evidence is there if you look for it. Take, for instance, the report that Ubisoft has teamed up with Derek Kolstad, the writer of the John Wick series, to create a *Splinter Cell* anime. According to Variety, who broke the story, Kolsted will serve as writer and executive producer for the series, which has already received a two season, 16 episode order from Netflix.

This initially seems like a bewildering move, but makes a certain amount of sense if you've been paying attention to Ubisoft's continued campaign to do anything *but* make a new *Splinter Cell* game. Despite rumours, no new *Splinter Cell* has been announced. So sure, do an anime.

BIG IN JAPAN

If this was the lone, freak example of a game franchise being adapted into an anime, The Spy could perhaps dismiss it as wild hubris. And yet, CD Projekt Red recently announced Cyberpunk: Edgerunners, a ten episode standalone anime series set in the *Cyberpunk 2077* universe, and developed by Japanese animation house Studio Trigger. Now it's starting to look like a trend.

Five minutes of choreographed violence later, MECHASPY flicks blood and oil off of a neon energy sword; sheathing it in an internal casing unit and deactivating battle mode. Reaching into the jacket pocket of one of the deceased suits, MECHASPY retrieves a folder marked 'Very Secret'. Mission accomplished. If Tom Clancy can be an anime, why not The Spy? MECHASPY out. ■

The Spy

UBISOFT HAS TEAMED UP WITH DEREK KOLSTAD TO CREATE A SPLINTER CELL ANIME

This month in... 2010

1 The Valve of 2010 was a fascinating subject for a cover feature, as evidenced by Tom Francis' report, which covers *Alien Swarm* releasing for free, three years of free *TF2* updates, and Steam arguably 'saving' PC gaming. Ten years later, and the company seems to be in a much weirder place, at least for those of us who don't love *Dota* or VR.

ISSUE
218, October 2010

ON THE COVER
Portal 2

IN THE CINEMAS
The Social Network

2 *Civilization V* and *StarCraft II* each score 93%. "*StarCraft II* is practically essential," writes Tim Edwards. Its subsequent esports scene agreed.

3 Adam Oxford's guide to building a PC suggests that not all that much has changed in the last ten years. SSDs were already an expensive but desirable upgrade, and sound cards a relic. The two most outdated things here are a) the trend of bolting two graphics cards together in an SLI or Crossfire configuration, and b) the act of installing Windows via a DVD.

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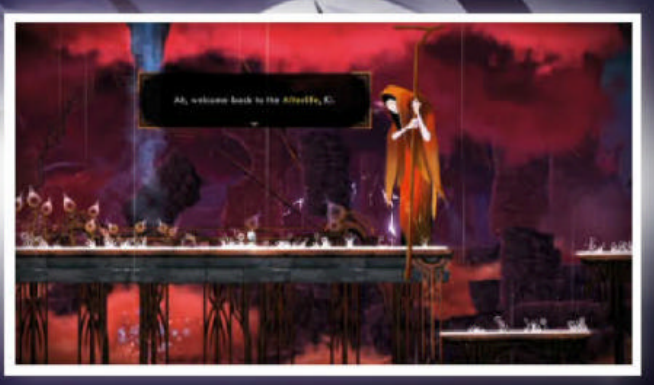
Evergate



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Special Report

PCG INVESTIGATES

High Ground's wall was formidable, but offered attackers at least three routes into the base.

THEATERS OF WAR

HALO 3 veterans reminisce about unreleased multiplayer maps

At one point while making *Halo 3*, every day map designer Steve Cotton came into work, multiplayer map lead Chris Carney would start playing Yub Nub, the Ewok song from the end of Star Wars: Return of the Jedi. Cotton was pitching a map built from floating platforms in a giant forest, which eventually became Guardian. "It was every time, without fail," Cotton remembers with a laugh. For awhile, one of *Halo 3*'s best maps would be nicknamed Jub-Jub.

With *Halo 3*'s recent launch on PC as part of *The Master Chief Collection*, PC gamers can finally play the best incarnation of *Halo*'s multiplayer. Even 13 years later, many of its maps hold up as some of the best play spaces in FPS history. It was also the first time Bungie didn't have to rush to get its maps made at a feverish sprint in the last few months before release.

Early on, the small multiplayer map team – just Carney, Cotton, and fellow artist Justin Hayward – started with a series of 'exercises' to design the perfect versions of small map elements, like a bunker or bridge or sniper tower. Those explorations eventually inspired several of the game's most memorable maps.

"The nice thing about the vignettes was we were failing fast," says Chris Carney. "We tried a bunch of stuff, and if it wasn't working we just moved on. We had zero investment in anything being precious. We were able to churn through a ton of ideas and dig into a few things that worked really well." High Ground, a memorable uphill assault on a base great for tense CTF matches, started with one of those exercises. The idea behind it was "could we build a wall that one team had to take from another team?" Cotton remembers, "There was something about D-Day, storming the beach at Normandy, that I wanted to capture in the sense of getting up to this wall... the other mechanic that I remember speccing out, that we didn't end up using, was the idea that there were defences, like mortar shells you could fire from behind the wall." In Cotton's early sketches for High Ground, you can see the "big ass mortar gun" was potentially going to be interactive. In the final map it's just decor.

Some of *Halo 3*'s other brilliant maps used pieces from those early design exercises, but were started with the goal of reinterpreting classic *Halo* maps. Cotton designed two of them: Valhalla and Guardian.

VIOLENT CARTOGRAPHERS

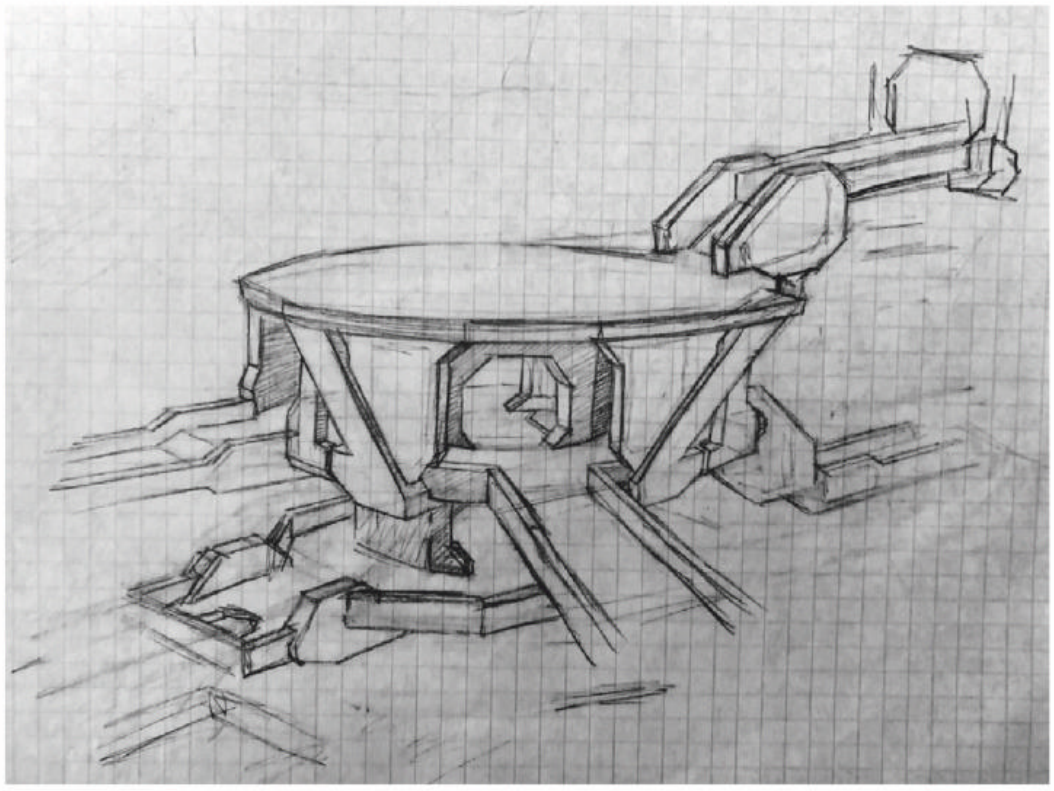
Guardian echoed Lockout's tight close-quarters combat and pathways that experienced players could find shortcuts between, with an open killing field in the centre. Its moody forest setting was a big aesthetic upgrade from

Sniping perfected

While performing their design exercises, Carney remembers creating "six or eight" versions of sniper towers, trying to find the perfect version. "In the end we realised the best one – "

"Is a hill!" Cotton jumps in, laughing. "You could control your line of sight the best, you could ease up over the hill anywhere you wanted to."

Sometimes it's the simple solutions, you know?



LEFT: Is there anything cooler than a map concept drawn on graph paper?

ABOVE: Guardian paired a Lockout-inspired design with natural elements.

the austere Lockout, and is actually the rare multiplayer map that doesn't borrow a palette from somewhere in the game's campaign. That's because there was at one point a part of the campaign set in Guardian's forest, but it never made it into the final game (though it's not too late for PC modders to turn *Halo*'s Grunts into Ewoks, right? Come on!)

Valhalla started as a napkin sketch Cotton drew in about five minutes, with a snaking river cutting through a gulch. "I wanted to evoke a lot of what Blood Gulch achieved in team-based base-to-base combat, with vehicles and infantry," says Cotton. "Another thing we identified we wanted to try was how to make a big map with vehicles, but let infantry actually be a viable option to get all the way across."

Enter the man cannons that launch players nearly halfway across the map. "There's that risk-reward of trying to take that centre ridge in Valhalla," Carney adds. "When you're flying through the air, you're essentially yelling 'Pull!' to the other team, and they can just wait there and shoot you out of the air."

The Valhalla map also spawned what might be the best piece of *Halo* trivia I have ever heard. Close to release, when Bungie was trying to finalise names for all the maps, Cotton threw out a joke name for Valhalla that almost stuck: Curious Gorge. "I think you and I got to work the next day and were looking at each other like 'this is not going to happen,'" Carney laughs.

As with most games, there were some *Halo 3* maps that ended up on the cutting room floor. Carney remembered two of them while we were talking, which had names nearly as delightful as Curious Gorge: Monkey Mountain and Warthog Inc. He dug up art of both of them and another map they partially designed, called Gauntlet. Gauntlet was used to test a variety of objective modes that didn't make the cut in multiplayer, so it was unfortunately never finished.

COTTON THREW OUT A JOKE NAME FOR VALHALLA THAT ALMOST STUCK: CURIOUS GORGE

"Warthog Inc was a map focused on our Territories gametype and was one of the very last cuts for *Halo 3*," Carney says. "It played really well and consisted of a collection of five one-to-two-story buildings which each contained a territory. In addition, there was the Warthog test track which allowed us to use vehicles in a medium-sized map, but made most of their movement predictable so they did not dominate. It just never hit a bar that I think any of us thought was amazing so we had to let it go."

Monkey Mountain was an assault up a hill with the twist that in a CTF match, the attackers could toss the flag over a cliff to a boat in a river below. But the river mechanic never worked well enough to justify the map.

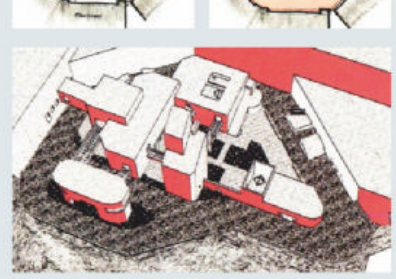
"We were able to fail super fast early, and create a lot of variety of options that we didn't end up using," Cotton remembers. "I think that's the real gold nugget here. We threw away a lot to get to the really, really good stuff. We're not always that lucky. Sometimes you have to use everything you make." ■

Wes Fenlon

CUT CONTENT *Early drawings of three maps that never quite worked out*

1 GAUNTLET
This shows *Halo 3*'s multiplayer once played with the idea of classes like Assault, Rifleman, and Warthog Dude.

2 MONKEY MOUNTAIN
A design that would let attackers ride an elevator to a beach and jungle cruise home with the flag.



3 WARTHOG INC
Warthog Inc would've shown players where the beloved Jeep was built and tested, complete with a race track looping the map. A 3D view shows Warthog Inc's interconnected buildings. Crossing requires a risky few seconds of exposure to warthog gunners found below.

Positive Influence

INSPIRATIONS AND CONNECTIONS IN GAMES

DIVINE INSPIRATION

How an obsession with **ULTIMA VII** led to some of PC's best RPGs

The 1980s were a halcyon age for playground liars, yet to be thwarted by the instantaneous fact-checking power of the internet. Some claimed they had an uncle at Nintendo; Swen Vincke's friend made up a computer game where you could do anything. He spun a tale about a D&D-style adventure on which he had met an AI character who could not only speak, but respond to questions. "He was having me on," Vincke remembers, "but I believed him."

Even once the deception was revealed, Vincke couldn't let go of the game that had been planted in his head, like one of *Baldur's Gate III*'s brain tadpoles. He clung to the dream for years, until he discovered *Ultima VII*.

"There was so much freedom," Vincke says. "It was non-linear, and you had to interrogate characters to know what you needed to do. You had a party that reacted to what you were doing. It pretty much fit what my friend had told me about so many years before."

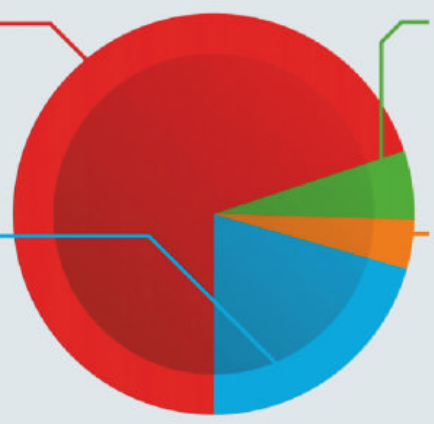
The discovery defined Vincke's tastes, and set his expectations for the games of the future. As the '90s rolled on, however, *Ultima VII* turned out to be an evolutionary dead-end. "The interactivity of the environment, using it to solve puzzles, how it all blended with the illusion of walking around in a world," Vincke says. "It's something that didn't go forward. If you take *Baldur's Gate*, it had lots of dialogue reactivity, but the world was very static."

Vincke made it his career goal to carry the baton for *Ultima VII*. It was to be a tough run. Larian set up shop at a time when the RPG genre was still in thrall to *Diablo*, and that influence was palpable in the studio's first *Divinity* game, which relegated its interactive world to the periphery. "The only thing you could get sold was an action-RPG," Vincke says.

The road only got more difficult as RPGs moved into three dimensions. Systems that governed the behaviour of physics objects were prone to misbehave, and didn't suit the genre's new requirements for polish.

"There were dynamic objects in *Divinity II: Ego Draconis*, but they were very limited," Vincke recalls. "We didn't have the full arsenal of tools that we needed. It was a very different direction from where all the engines were going back in the day. There was always that fight."

KITCHEN VINCKE *The parts that make up* Divinity



71% ULTIMA VII
An RPG as dense as it was sprawling, in which every object could be manipulated – as could some of the NPCs.

20% ULTIMA UNDERWORLD
The proto-immersive sim was a tactile physics sandbox that informed Larian's approach to world design.

5% CELTIC LEGENDS
An ancient Amiga game in which wizards could instantly transport their troops, leading to *Original Sin*'s teleportation.

4% CASINO GAMES
When a German publisher went bust, Larian resorted to work-for-hire to survive and learned how to keep loot distribution compulsive.

LORD FLEMISH

Since kickstarting *Divinity: Original Sin*, however, Larian has built and expanded its own engine, enhancing its systemic capabilities with each new game. By holding up *Ultima VII* as a guiding light, the studio has found critical acclaim and commercial success without compromise.

Satisfaction still eludes Vincke, though – who believes that Larian's games have yet to match his inspiration's unrestrained freedom. Even now, with *Baldur's Gate III*, the studio is still squeezing in features from *Ultima VII* – such as the stackable crates that can be climbed between different levels, like clumsy staircases.

"Maybe it's my imagination that exaggerates it now, but I remember scouring every single screen [of *Ultima VII*] trying to find clues, and often there were." he says. "Players should always be rewarded for their exploration: it's a lesson that we teach our designers today."

Vincke sometimes sees those designers playing *Ultima VII* – a younger generation trying to understand the relic their boss never stops going on about. "I tease the programmers," he says. "'Well, you could do it in *Ultima VII*, I don't see why you can't do it with your team today.'"

Crate staircases aside, though, Vincke isn't looking to recreate the mechanics of *Ultima VII* – rather the platonic ideal associated with it. "*Ultima VII* did a whole bunch of things badly," he admits. "I only remember the things it did really well. We're shooting more for the feeling. That sense of entering a world where anything is possible, limited only by my own creativity. That strong motivation to do things because there's a storyline driving me forward, and that agency to impact all the denizens of that world."

When Vincke puts it like that, it sounds less like *Ultima VII*, and more like the kind of perfect game a friend would make up on the playground. ■

Jeremy Peel

THE STUDIO HAS FOUND CRITICAL ACCLAIM AND COMMERCIAL SUCCESS WITHOUT COMPROMISE

LEFT TOP: Larian's first RPG reflected the dominance of *Diablo* at the time.

LEFT BOTTOM: *Mass Effect* and *The Witcher* were in vogue when *Divinity II* was released.

DNA Tracing

GAMING'S LINEAGES EXPLORED

IN LYON, COLANTONIO DIRECTED A SPIRITUAL SEQUEL TO ULTIMA UNDERWORLD

CLOCKWORK MAN

How a passion to make sims overcame all odds at ARKANE STUDIOS

There are some creative people born out of place and out of time. In 1993, Raphael Colantonio should have been one of the MIT graduates and musicians working on the *Ultima Underworld* games at Looking Glass Studios, infusing early 3D gaming with rudimentary physics and atmospheric sound design. Instead, through some cosmic oversight, he was a teenager in France, bored and playing in a band.

By the time Colantonio had gained enough games industry experience to run his own project, Looking Glass was a dying star; having invented the slow and thoughtful immersive sim, it had succumbed to the cruel commercial realities of a medium more interested in *Doom* and *Diablo*. Rather than learn the sensible business lesson, however, Colantonio decided to will his favourite studio back into being, on another continent, in a different millennium.

Assembling developers in Lyon, Colantonio directed a spiritual sequel to *Ultima Underworld*. After failing to come to an agreement with EA for the licence, his team invented its own realm – with humans, goblins, trolls and ratlings eking out an existence beneath, yep, a dying star.

BELOW: An early pre-echo of *Dishonored*'s journeys with Samuel the boatman.

GOING UNDERGROUND

There's no point in pretending *Arx Fatalis* is approachable today. Movement was sluggish and awkward, as if you really had woken up after a night on the cold, stone floor of a goblin prison cell. It ignored a decade of UI development, forcing players to interact with its dense first-person world via a semi-point-and-click system, like *Deus Ex* and *Thief* had never happened.

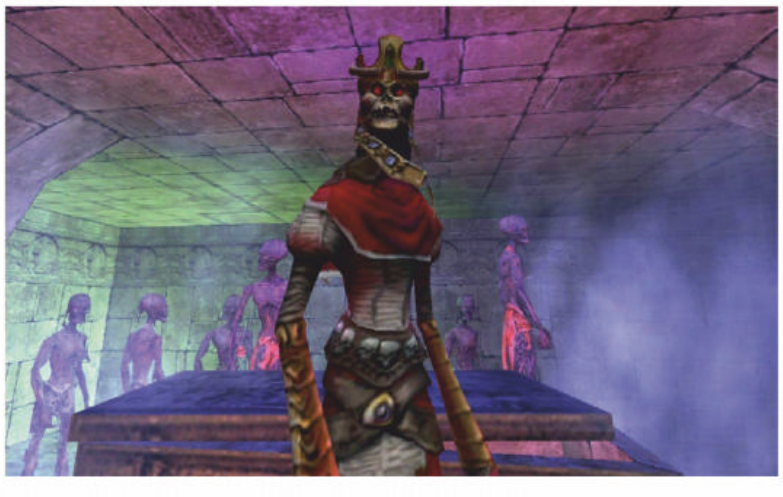
But that stubborn resistance to modern conventions shaped the studio's values, too. This was a game in which you might guzzle wine to heal your wounds, then drunkenly pick a fight with a giant spider, timing your swings with the moments your sleepy eyes reopened. Where you could feasibly pull a decorative shield from the wall of a castle and take it into battle, or pawn it at the blacksmith's across the road. Nothing was simply for show, but meticulously simulated, even if that meant sacrificing cinematics and lavish animations.

Arx Fatalis was a financial failure, and so its sequel was converted into an action game at the behest of Ubisoft. It was, perhaps, the best thing that could have happened to Arkane, still malleable in youth. *Dark Messiah* pared back the RPG elements and focused on dynamic first-person combat in a chaotic environmental playground. Its spike traps and tumbling stacks of barrels were gloriously overpowered, so that players were rewarded for finding creative solutions to their problems. It might not have been the game Colantonio wanted to make, but it taught the studio a new immediacy, and proved its obsession with object manipulation belonged in a medium changed by *Half-Life 2*'s gravity gun.

RAVENHOLM-WARD BOUND

The same thought occurred to Valve, who put Arkane to work on a *Half-Life 2* spin-off afterwards. *Return to Ravenholm*'s innovation was a nail gun, which in another studio's hands would be a base tool for violence; Arkane instead made each nail capable of carrying electrical current, enabling players to thud a charged path across a corridor to zap zombies, or route power to an appliance.

Sadly, though, Arkane fell victim to Valve's habit of ending outside collaborations in the late stages, and



AUGMENTATION

The* Deus Ex *developers now fused with Arkane

HARVEY SMITH
Lead level designer and the man who built Liberty Island. Also worked on *Thief: Deadly Shadows*.

STEVE POWERS
An alumnus of Origin Systems, and the man responsible for the game's beloved Hong Kong hub level.

RICARDO BARE
Deus Ex was Bare's first project in the games industry. He went on to be lead designer on *Dishonored*.

ROBIN TODD
Writer and cyberpunk enthusiast who designed that classic opening cutscene.

HIGHS AND LOWS

Arkane Studios amid the hits and cancellations

KEY
- Arkane Studios
- Valve
- Looking Glass
- MachineGames

ULTIMA UNDERWORLD
The world's first immersive sim, courtesy of Looking Glass.

ARX FATALIS
Arkane's debut and intended sequel to *Underworld*.

DARK MESSIAH
A commercial compromise. Gaming's best kicking outside *FIFA*.

DISHONORED
Arkane's breakthrough and best-loved series.

DISHONORED 2
Made Emily Kaldwin playable.

DISHONORED: DEATH OF THE OUTSIDER
Starred another female assassin, Billie Lurk.

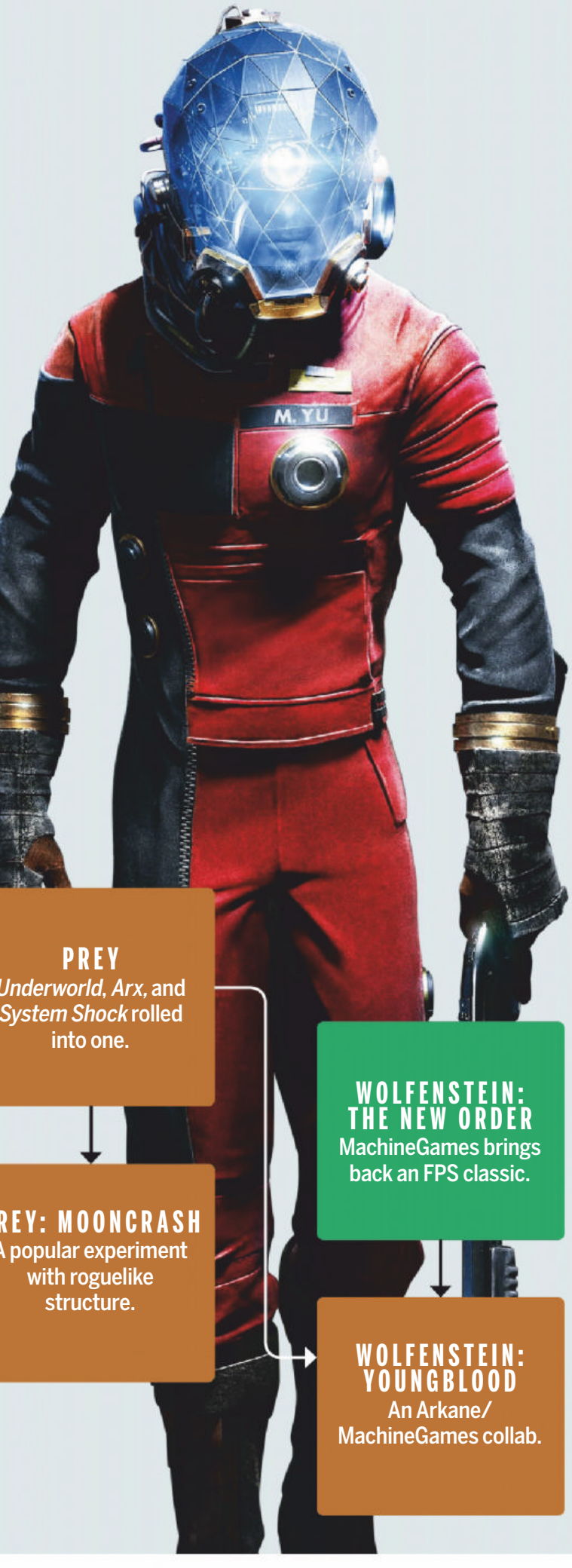
DEATHLOOP
A bold resurrection of *The Crossing*'s premise.

HALF-LIFE 2
Valve's seminal shooter sequel.

HALF-LIFE 2: RETURN TO RAVENHOLM
A cancelled spin-off that Arkane still mourns today.

THE CROSSING
A Parisian sci-fi adventure with player invasions. Also cancelled.

LMNO
An ET-like story built by Looking Glass vets. Cancelled!



PREY
Underworld, *Arx*, and *System Shock* rolled into one.

PREY: MOONCRASH
A popular experiment with roguelike structure.

WOLFENSTEIN: THE NEW ORDER
MachineGames brings back an FPS classic.

WOLFENSTEIN: YOUNGBLOOD
An Arkane/MachineGames collab.

Half-Life fans never did return to Ravenholm. In fact, the whole next stage of Arkane's development happened in darkness. One perk of joining the company is getting an opportunity to play *The Crossing*, the unreleased high concept shooter the studio created alongside Viktor Antonov, the artist-cum-architect behind *Half-Life 2*'s City 17. Arkane wanted a multiplayer FPS, but was unwilling to let go of single player's steady pacing and intricate level design. Its solution was to have players pop up as opponents in each others' campaigns, preempting the invasion concept FromSoftware would use in *Dark Souls*.

The Crossing fell apart, as did an ambitious Spielberg game Arkane contributed to, headed up by Looking Glass legends Doug Church and Randy Smith. But that multiplayer invasion premise is immediately recognisable in the studio's 2020 project, *Deathloop* – a shooter in which players are hunted and haunted by their peers. Arkane is nothing if not persistent, and the ideas from its lost period continue to be remixed in its work today.

DUNWALLIN'

Viktor Antonov's European city designs – layered and vertiginous – became the backbone for *Dishonored*. *Ravenholm*'s power circuits, meanwhile, can be seen in Dunwall's whale oil network – a system whereby tanks of the volatile liquid can be removed and plugged in elsewhere, or thrown as explosive weapons.

It has to be said, though, that the greatest gain from Arkane's lost years wasn't an idea, but a person: Harvey Smith. Colantonio had met the *Deus Ex* designer after moving to Austin during *Dark Messiah*'s development. He subsequently directed the Lyon team from across an ocean, in another timezone – a highly unusual decision in an era when remote collaboration was much less common. In the US, however, Colantonio could network with developers who had worked at both Looking Glass and its successor, Ion Storm Austin – in short, his heroes.

BY JOINING ARKANE, SMITH ESSENTIALLY AGREED TO BECOME CHAIR OF HIS OWN FAN CLUB

By joining Arkane as a partner, Smith essentially agreed to become chair of his own fan club. It was an extraordinary coup for Arkane, which today houses as many former Ion Storm staffers as you'll find anywhere. Colantonio not only gained a talented co-creative director, but entered the lineage of studios he had missed out on, despite the physical distance and lateness of the hour. But then, that's the way of the immersive sim player – to solve impossible problems through a limited set of tools.

Nowadays, Arkane is old enough to have its own spiritual sequels. Colantonio's last act before leaving the company was to direct *Prey* – a sci-fi dungeon crawler in the tradition of *Arx Fatalis*, about coming to know every corner of a multi-levelled space. Even as Arkane has pushed forward, it has retained that intrinsic stubbornness; the resolve to stick with its favourite ideas until the world catches up. ■

Jeremy Peel

ABOVE: Immersive sim levels tend to feel real above all else.

BELOW LEFT: Vertical space has been a hallmark of Arkane's work.

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NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
October 2, 2020	EA Motive	In-house	bit.ly/307aZhi

STAR WARS: SQUADRONS

Dogfights worthy of the franchise finally return

After playing *Star Wars: Squadrons*, I'm mad that it's taken 21 years for EA and Lucasfilm to remember that flying a damn X-Wing is cool as hell. But here we are – with new proof that getting in a cockpit and blasting through a space dogfight is still one of the best ways to experience Star Wars.

PLAYED IT

It only took a few minutes to assure me that EA hadn't screwed anything up here. This is genuinely the 2020 reimagining of *X-Wing vs TIE Fighter* I hoped it would be. While flying might be a bit more forgiving than it was in those games 20-plus years ago (I ricocheted off walls a few times without taking too much damage), this is still more sim than *Rogue Squadron*. It's first-person only. You have to manage your power system between shields, guns, and engines to suit the moment; you can also rebalance your shields from front to back, which will help more skilled players survive dogfights. Aiming your standard laser cannons doesn't give you a leading target reticle that tells you exactly where to shoot, so you'll have to get a feel for that yourself, eying the speed and distance to your target.

Even turning takes finesse. Like a racecar, at half-speed your fighter can make tighter turns, key for avoiding missiles or other players on your tail. Just dodging a missile felt like an exciting accomplishment, and I felt like a bit of a badass when I managed to rebalance my front shields to the rear when I started getting shot, then corkscrewed away from the enemy on my tail. It takes some coordination to do all of those at once, let alone follow it up with a kill.

I played *Squadrons* with an Xbox gamepad, because unfortunately the demo didn't have full HOTAS support. A joystick definitely feels like it will be the right way to experience this game – though I did pretty well with a pad, it was still difficult to wrap my head around moving efficiently in 3D space. But that's a big part of the learning curve for any flight sim, and I'm glad that *Squadrons* feels sophisticated enough that it'll take me many hours to really get good at it.

My *Squadrons* demo was focused on multiplayer, but there's also a singleplayer campaign, which you can play from the perspective of the Empire and the New Republic. I only played the prologue, but the developers told me that the campaign will have bespoke missions to go along with its story. That was reassuring, since *Squadrons* is a game that seems largely focused on its multiplayer – I was a little worried that the campaign might just dress up the same modes with a few cutscenes in between.

That's not a knock against the multiplayer, though. The primary mode, Fleet Battles, is where players will be spending most of their time, and it delivers just the right scale and structure to make for exciting multiplayer showdowns.

FLEET FIGHTS

Fleet Battles are 5v5 matches, either online or against bots, that throw you into a large scale, tug-of-war fight between two flagships. Each side also has a pair of smaller capital ships that you have to knock out before attacking the flagship, and the battles are filled out with a bunch of AI fighters flying around. These mean you're rarely going to spend much time without a target, even if the other team's players are all respawning.

Compared to dogfights, *Squadrons*' only other mode, the scope and added strategy of Fleet Battles makes them a lot more engaging. It's more straightforward than something like *Battlefield 1*'s Operations mode or even *Battlefront*'s Starfighter Assault, with neither team being explicitly on attack or defence.

At the start of a Fleet Battle, the two teams butt heads in a dogfight. There's a »

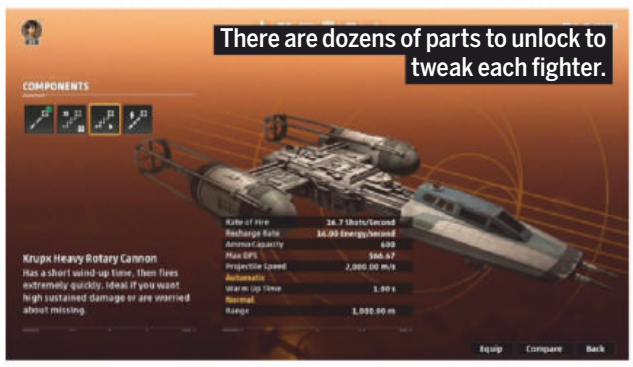
YOU HAVE TO MANAGE YOUR POWER SYSTEM BETWEEN SHIELDS, GUNS, AND ENGINES

Star Wars: Squadrons

The hangar is where you customise your fighter. Or just gawk at it.

Star Destroyer turrets will chew you up and spit you back out as scrap.

Attacking a Star Destroyer is an exciting, intimidating rush.



meter for each team's morale, and getting kills fills the meter up for your side (other players are worth a bigger morale boost than AI fighters). Once you pass a certain morale threshold, you can move forward to attack the enemy capital ships. If your team dies too many times, the meter will swing back in the other direction, and you'll have to go on defence and protect your own capital ships until you earn enough kills to go on the offensive again.

The final stage is attacking the flagship, which is a big cruiser for the Republic and a Star Destroyer for the Empire. Like in the classic Star Wars flight sims, to take down these ships you need to destroy weak points like shield generators and power systems, so it's a multi-step process. There's no correct order for what you destroy first, so defenders won't always know exactly what you're going for. Plus, you're in space – there are a lot of directions to come from.

I like the structure of the fleet battles a lot, because they give each team a chance to make a comeback and you can't just brute force your way to a win. Dying gives the other team points, so suicide runs are pointless, and attacking solo is a good way to get targeted by every turret on giant ship. Against another team of decent human players, teamwork and ship composition will be important – you'll have to attack targets together, and with the right balance of nimble A-Wings or TIE Interceptors and heavier-hitting bombers to make real progress.

BUILD YOUR FIGHTER

Long-term, *Squadrons* seems like it's relying on its ship customisation system to create variety across hours of multiplayer. You can unlock a ton of different laser cannons, missiles, shields, even hulls for the ships, and these seem like they'll genuinely transform the playstyle of your ship. One shield offers less defence but speeds up how fast your lasers charge. Another makes your ship take way less damage, but never recharges if fully depleted.

There are laser cannons that offer some auto-aim, but don't hit as hard. There are rockets that can't lock on but give you tons of ammo, and others that take ages to lock on but can do big damage to capital ships. Any of these could really change how you approach each phase of a Fleet Battle, especially when you factor in playing with four friends with similarly tweaked out configurations. You could make a sturdier A-Wing or a faster, glass cannon Y-Wing, or swap ships mid-battle to counter a particular enemy player who's outgunning or outmanoeuvring you.

The parts I was able to try made for some memorable moments. In my first dogfight rounds I picked the slow, boatlike TIE Reaper support ship, which let me throw out resupply materials for my teammates. Because I wasn't as manoeuvrable, I opted for the homing lasers, and racked up a pile of kill assists on fighters I helped whittle down. Later I had fun with the automated ion cannon, which zapped a TIE Fighter I was chasing, leaving it helpless for me to blast to bits.

It'll take hours more with the game to get a good sense of how dramatically those ship parts affect the dynamics of a match, but I'm hopeful they feel like meaningful unlocks to chase as you earn points just for playing.

My one real worry with *Squadrons* is that Fleet Battles might not be enough to keep its multiplayer going long-term. Plenty of competitive games, from *Counter-Strike* to *League of Legends*, have survived for years or decades on a single gametype (and hell, sometimes even a single map). But the spectacle of the battle, of being in a starfighter, is a big part of the appeal here, and after 20 years it's hard to be satisfied with one big mode.

Squadrons is a £35 game, and the developers aren't pitching it as a games-as-a-service model where new stuff is constantly added. EA says it wants this to be a complete package from the start. I think *Squadrons* is likely to get quite a few post-launch updates if it's a success, and I hope those add just a bit more variety to the combat situations that I sense might be lacking right now.

Flying up to a giant Star Destroyer in my demo was an awesome experience – I can't overstate how great this game looks in the Frostbite engine. I'd love EA to bring in Super Star Destroyers or attacks on a space station, something huge that really sells how tiny your fighter is. Co-op for the campaign, too, feels like a natural addition. I hope Squadrons gets the opportunity to expand, because what I've played of it so far is really promising.

Wes Fenlon

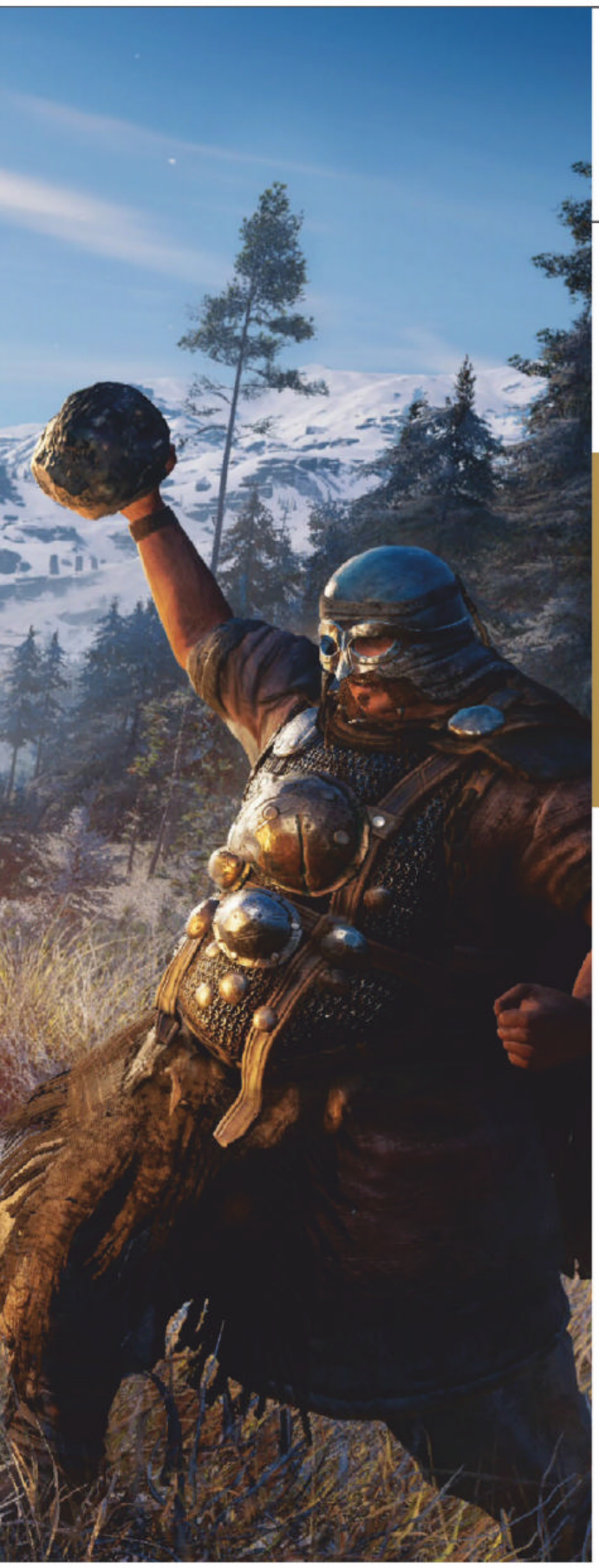
FLEET BATTLES GIVE EACH TEAM A CHANCE TO MAKE A COMEBACK

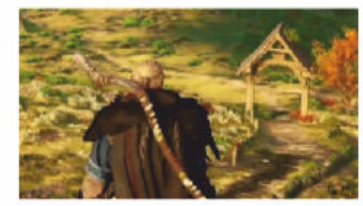
Assassin's Creed Valhalla

Miss me with the obsession over axes. Flails are where it's at.

Moody buggers, aren't they?.

You can enter enemy territory solo, or roll up with a Viking squad to kick off a raid.





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
November 17, 2020	Ubisoft	In-house	assassinscreed.ubisoft.com

ASSASSIN'S CREED VALHALLA

Are longboats and axes enough to stand out from the crowd?

I almost dropped my controller in a panic when a nun pulled a sword on me. Maybe I should've seen it coming – she *was* praying in a field of corpses. But I wasn't ready for her to charge me, shouting about chastising sinners. Two hours into my demo, *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* finally surprised me.

That fight was the first 'world event' I ran into in *Valhalla*, shorter and simpler than a sidequest, but also more fun, because I had no idea it was coming. Completing world events is a new way *Valhalla* rewards you skill points to level up Viking assassin Eivor. As Ubisoft continues to turn *Assassin's Creed* into an RPG series, more focused on story and character-building, it needs many more moments like that one. But not *exactly* like that one, because 'bloodthirsty nun' is the kind of card you can really only play once.

Like *Odyssey*, *Valhalla* offers a giant open world, with plenty of the tropes you'd expect from the genre. There are points of interest on your map, vantage points to climb, completion bars to fill up by collecting treasure and finding secrets, ore deposits to break open for materials, bits of loot from enemies you can use to upgrade your weapons.

I didn't get to see one of the things I'm most curious about in *Valhalla* – the settlement you'll upgrade throughout the story. I'm a sucker for a base-building minigame, and I also love the idea of having my own squad of Vikings I can call on. The bits of *Valhalla* I spent most of my time with made it plain Ubisoft has taken a lot of inspiration from *The Witcher 3*, including decisions in quests that help you define what kind of character Eivor is. Before I lead my troops into a battle, do I fire them up with promises of vengeance, or tell them we fight for ourselves? If I show another Viking mercy after defeating him in a boss fight, how will that come into play later in the game?

I'm not ruining the moment, am I?

WITH A FEW MONTHS TO GO, VALHALLA CLEARLY NEEDS SOME MORE POLISH

THE PILLAGE PEOPLE

Valhalla retains all of the classic *Assassin's Creed*'s climbing and stealth, but I found myself thrust into combat or picking off enemies with a bow much more than going in for assassinations. The stealth feels like a holdover from a different game. *Valhalla*'s combat having more *stuff* in it than *Origins* or *Odyssey* doesn't necessarily make it more engaging over the long term, either.

If the story is great, and some sidequests are more interesting than a couple throwaway ones I encountered, then even a decent combat system will be good enough. *The Witcher 3*'s combat was easily its weakest element after all. I'd gladly put up with an evolution of *Odyssey* if this giant open world lives up to its potential as a vessel for great storytelling.

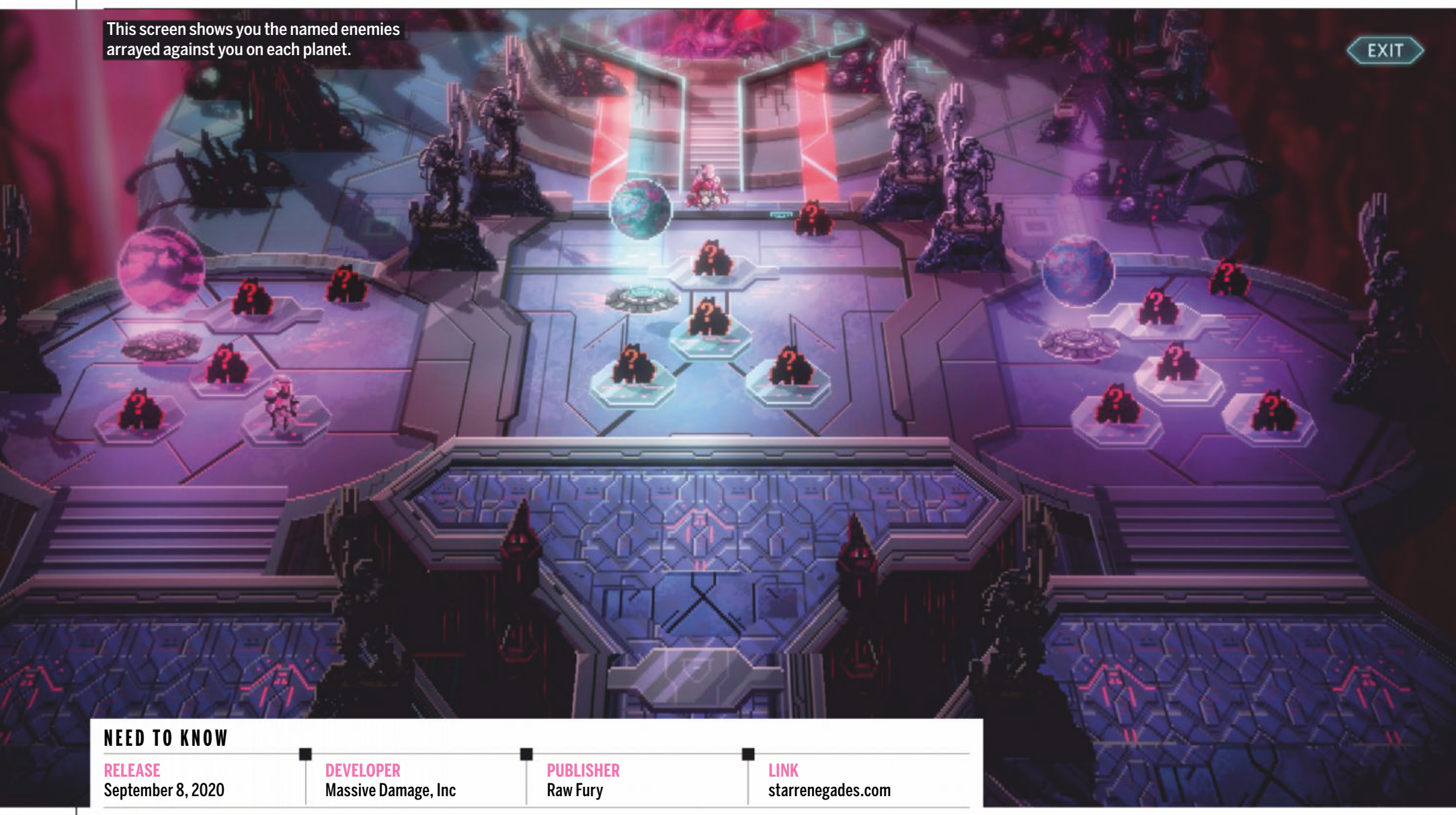
PLAYED IT

But with a few months to go, *Valhalla* clearly needs some more polish. I ran into a few bugs, and it just doesn't feel like a game with the wow factor I'd hope for, considering it's coming to next-gen consoles. Combat is responsive, but AI characters tend to move with the same old stilted animations, which stand out more as games become more detailed. Though the environment looks beautiful, nothing in *Valhalla* really blew me away – from my memory it looks comparable to *The Witcher 3*, which came out in 2015.

The big draw of the latest *Assassin's Creeds* has been exploring a particular historical setting at a fidelity we've never seen before. By the end of *Odyssey* and *Origins* you were hunting down and battling mythological figures like the Sphinx and Cyclops and Anubis. I'll accept some open-world bloat if I eventually get to throw down with Odin or tame Fenrir and ride him into battle.

Wes Fenlon

Star Renegades



This screen shows you the named enemies arrayed against you on each planet.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
September 8, 2020

DEVELOPER
Massive Damage, Inc

PUBLISHER
Raw Fury

LINK
starrenegades.com

STAR RENEGADES

Shadow of War meets *Fire Emblem* meets the kitchen sink

When I first played *Star Renegades* towards the end of last year, I was charmed by its looks and mind-bending combat. But what I didn't get a sense of was quite how ambitious it was going to be. After a couple of hours with a far more complete build, I'm struck by how many different things it now squeezes into its roughly roguelike structure.

PLAYED IT

The things that impressed me before are better than ever now. The pixelart graphics, with their slick lighting effects and flashy animations, are a joy in motion. And the combat – which uses a timeline of events where attacks happen at different points, allowing you to interrupt and counter enemy actions before they happen – is tactical and satisfying.

I expected they'd slot into a fairly standard RPG storyline, but the reality is far more complex. As a friendly robot, you're tasked with building teams and making expeditions to different planets invaded by the dastardly Imperium in order to drive them back. Each consists of a series of regions, through which you must choose a path to the final boss.

Different paths offer different fights, but also different rewards – including DNA with which to level up your chosen squad, new weapons and equipment, healing and more. Once you've entered three regions, you need to camp before you can progress further. Around the fire, your characters can use unique abilities to buff each other. The more they do so, the more they build relationships between each other, unlocking new bonuses, dialogue, and, it's implied, potentially even having children together, who'll become new heroes in your roster – similar to Nintendo's *Fire Emblem* series.

YOUR OPPOSITION IS DETERMINED BY SOMETHING AKIN TO THE NEMESIS SYSTEM

ENEMY MINE

Your opposition is determined by something akin to *Shadow of Mordor*'s Nemesis System – named enemies are generated for the planet, each with their own strengths and quirks that have to be adapted to. When injured, they may flee, surviving to hound you again another day. Lose to them, and they can be promoted, gaining new powers and underlings.

It's an impressively layered experience... but I'm not sure any individual layer works quite right. Planets offer lots of routes, but the map's too busy to offer clear tactical choices. Character relationships are mechanically rewarding, but narratively shallow. Named bosses are fun combat puzzles, but being faceless cyborgs they're hardly memorable.

The result is an experience that is ambitious and interesting, but perhaps less than the sum of its parts. The battles remain a treat, however – their fierce, complex challenge lured me into two playthroughs of the demo, even if the structure they were housed within never quite grabbed me.

Robin Valentine

msi

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Watch Dogs: Legion

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
October 29, 2020	Ubisoft	In-house	watchdogs.ubisoft.com

WATCH DOGS: LEGION

Play as anyone – and build the perfect heist crew

Threequel *Watch Dogs: Legion* is bringing new meaning to 'ragtag group of misfits'. With no traditional protagonist, I'm playing as a collection of random London citizens: a construction worker, a hacker, and an ambulance driver whose most interesting ability, as far as I can tell, is that he can play the guitar.

It feels more like I've put together a book club or a weekly board game group than a team of dangerous, shadowy operatives who are going to take back London from the oppressive forces of evil. And I love that. It's a fresh approach to hero building (and hopefully storytelling) in a game that otherwise felt pretty familiar during the three hours I played.

In *Legion* you're free to approach any citizen you see in the world and recruit them to the hacker collective Dedsec, though typically you'll need to do them a little favour first. To enlist my guitar-playing ambulance driver, for example, I needed to first recover a bunch of stolen human organs that were going to be sold on the black market. A lawyer I recruited had his ADHD medication stolen by a couple of gang members, so I had to hack the goons' phones to learn where they'd stashed it. Quid pro quo: solve people's problems and they'll be willing to join you and your cause.

PLAYED IT

DOG DAYS

Dressing up in games is fun, but it's even better when your clothing has more than just a cosmetic effect. My construction worker is especially useful, as gangs often hang out on construction sites and her vest and hardhat let her stroll right in and stand a few feet away from mob bosses while downloading data from their phones. A cop on my team, naturally, could walk right into the police precinct and nose around without tripping alarms or facing arrest like the rest of the crew.

Team members have additional attributes and flaws that come into play. A lawyer will reduce the time your recruits spend in jail if they're captured. Conversely, if you recruit a thief who's on probation, they'll spend extra time in jail if they're caught. Recruit a pensioner and they won't be able to sprint due to their limited mobility. This makes forming your team in *Legion* like an Ocean's 11 recruitment sequence, only there are literally thousands of possible recruits to choose from.

It's all made more fun by deciding which team member is best for a particular mission – or even just part of a mission. At one point I had my construction worker summon her cargo drone, and then I swapped her out with my hacker so he could hop onto and fly it around. You can also swap a lot of your gadgets between your agents: there are unique weapons, like my construction worker's nail gun, but everyone on the team can use the spider-bot, for example.

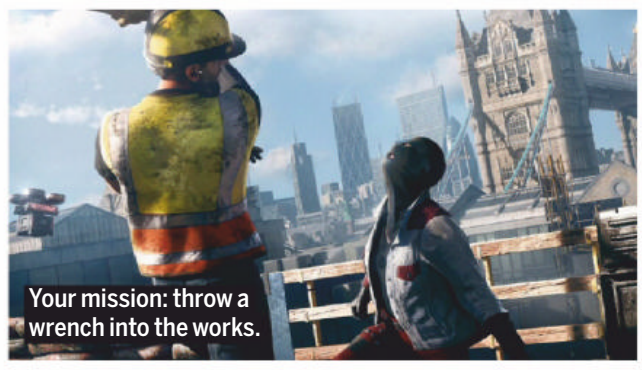
This mix-and-match approach to missions and agents makes *Watch Dogs: Legion* feel like a real collaboration, a movie heist where one agent does what they're best at and then passes the baton to someone else. It invigorates a game that otherwise feels a lot like something I've played many times before.

Don't worry: if a team of drivers, lawyers and blue-collar workers doesn't sound like an ass-kicking elite squad to you, there are more traditionally exciting options. One of my team members is a hitman already wanted for several murders (to say nothing of the killings I had him commit). You can even recruit a government spy who drives a car that fires missiles and has other James Bond-like gadgets. Your team doesn't need to feel like a book club, unless you really want it to. I really want it to.

Christopher Livingston

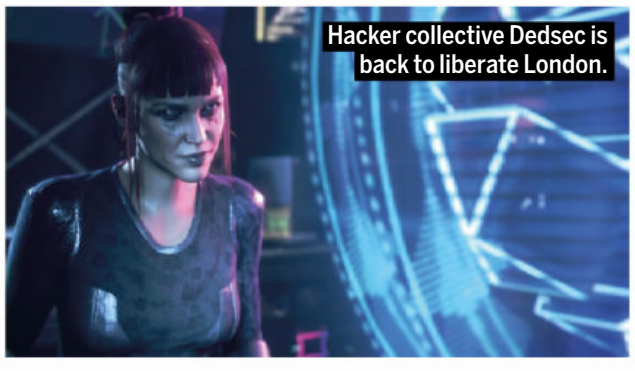
SOLVE PEOPLE'S PROBLEMS AND THEY'LL BE WILLING TO JOIN YOU AND YOUR CAUSE

Hack drones for a nice distraction.



Your mission: throw a wrench into the works.

There's a bit of James Bond in the mix, too.

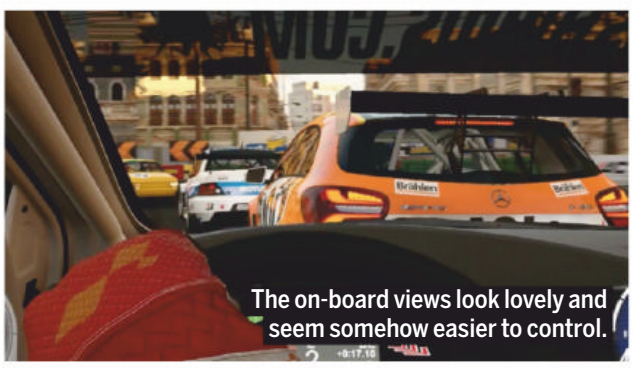


Hacker collective Dedsec is back to liberate London.

Project Cars 3

Early laps see frequent side-by side battles for several corners.

Bright headlights can make rival cars look a little plasticky at present.



The on-board views look lovely and seem somehow easier to control.

The AI cars are fallible and occasionally spin out without interference.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
August 28, 2020	Slightly Mad Studios	Bandai Namco	projectcarsgame.com

PROJECT CARS 3

Slightly Mad Studio's racing sim switches to slicks

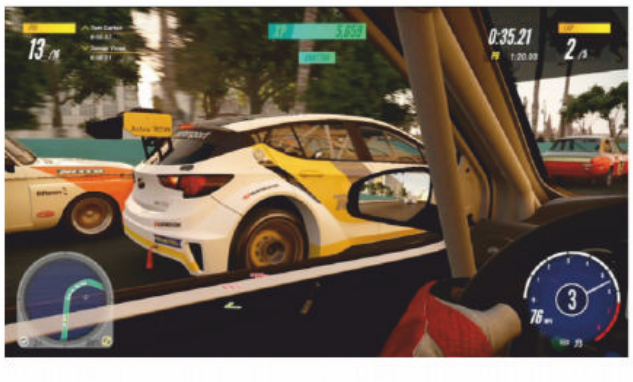
In *Project CARS*' past, extreme detail was championed. You could press a button for 'engine on', pirouette like an ice dancer on the first corner due to too-cold tyres, and even start a gruelling career in karting, with the dream of one day making it into the equivalent series of F1. Well, forget all that; *Project CARS 3* is a game.

The presentation is uncharacteristically flashy, oddly reminiscent of the likes of *Asphalt 9* on iOS, with lots of XP bars and circles filling up and expanding colour bars that transition nicely into menu screens, giving everything a very modern and slick sheen. Instant gratification is the order of the day compared to the previous games' long-haul approach to... well, pretty much everything.

Serious sim racers needn't fear – wheel control still gives them the realism they crave. Driving lines are smooth, weight distribution is sublime, and playing in the look-to-apex helmet cam makes it feel involving. And it can be just as punishing as ever if you so desire. But conversely, less committed racing game fans now benefit from a completely overhauled pad control model – and they're in for a treat.

Where in the past pad control was far too twitchy and finicky for many, there's now superbly balanced, context-sensitive steering that lets you waggle the stick less subtly without sending your car straight into the sand trap. It's still impressively responsive, and you can still arrive at a corner backwards if you ask too much of your adhesion with the road's surface, but it's a massive improvement for playability.

This new orange marker shows you the apex for any given corner.



INSTANT GRATIFICATION IS THE ORDER OF THE DAY COMPARED TO THE PREVIOUS GAMES

GOING PRO

The overhauled career mode is reminiscent of *Forza Motorsport 7*, giving you tiered collections of themed events so you needn't stick to just one discipline for extended periods. Your finishing position isn't always everything, either, as gamey challenges like drifting for five seconds before passing, overtaking cars cleanly, or even mastering a certain number of corners all count towards your progress.

This makes every corner a minigame in itself, as new visual markers hover over the track, telling you where to brake and where the apex is, which gives experts clear indicators for mastering each turn while also giving newbies driving instructions without resorting to the traditional dynamic racing line.

One other big change is in car ownership. You can now buy a car and level it up through racing it repeatedly. Furthermore, mods are now available to purchase and install, laid out clearly so you can see exactly what performance boost you'll get for your in-game money.

PLAYED IT

Some 12 new track layouts have been added including Shanghai streets, lovely Tuscany country roads and the ever-enjoyable Interlagos GP circuit.

The game is already well optimised, and offers a 144hz mode on top of 60hz and 59hz options. You can choose to supersample your frames too, which seems to be the only thing to cause noticeable frame rate drops on the Nvidia RTX 2070 I tested the game on, running everything else on Ultra at 1080p with apparent ease. It also supports VR if you can stomach all the turning.

All signs point to *Project CARS 3* being a very capable racer, and certainly the most accessible serious sim we've seen in years. Whether existing fans will embrace the changes is the biggest question mark, but since they'll likely buy the game anyway, it makes sense to appeal to a bigger audience too. It's also going to be interesting to see how the online mode caters for those who want... nay, demand more involved race weekends.

Justin Towell

Windbound

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
August 28, 2020	5 Lives Studios	Deep Silver	windboundgame.com

WINDBOUND

A breezy boat survival sim that captures the joys of sailing

The sails are high and the wind is strong as my small but humble boat cruises through open waters. It's my first self-built ship and, thankfully, everything is running smoothly. That is, until I crash into a surprise reef and a bunch of beefy crabs chew my lovely boat into a husk.

Boat life isn't always smooth sailing in *Windbound*. After my epic – if small – vessel is defeated by a bunch of angry crustaceans, I swim back to shore and begin to gather the materials to rebuild. Scavenging for the resources I need takes me no time at all, and before my hatred of crabs has time to manifest into a full-blown grudge, I'm out on the sea again. *Windbound* wants you to enjoy the pleasures of sailing without the timely grind of having to hunt for more boat-building resources, and it's something I more than appreciate.

In *Windbound*, survival is all geared towards sea exploration and for the game's protagonist, Kara, sailing is a skill that comes as second nature. She's from a tribe of nomad seafarers, but unfortunately gets separated from the group during a storm. After washing up on the sandy shores of a mysterious island, she discovers an ancient power and decides to restore this power to the ruins scattered across the world's islands – think Disney's Moana mixed with the mechanics of *Breath of the Wild*.

Each day is a cycle of hunting, gathering, crafting, and sailing as you begin to explore *Windbound*'s waters. It's an open world where instead of one large landmass, there are lots of small procedurally generated islands, so building and upgrading your ship is vital for exploration. After you've collected all the resources from an island they're gone for good, so you'll have to keep hopping between them to survive.

THINK DISNEY'S MOANA MIXED WITH THE MECHANICS OF BREATH OF THE WILD

SHIP SHAPE

Alongside upgrading your boat, you can also craft weapons, tools, and better clothing for survival. The only enemies you'll be up against are the islands' natural residents. I made the grave mistake of underestimating the island's warthogs – I was whittling down the health of what I thought was an adult pig only for its much larger, fiercer mama to kick my butt.

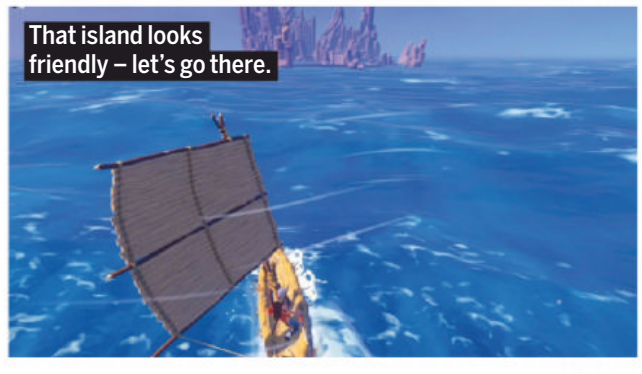
As you travel further into the world you'll be up against forest, desert, and swamp biomes, which can drastically change your survival tactics. I got completely lost in a foggy swamp and had to sneak around to try to not get attacked by poisonous wildlife. After clearing an island of its resources and restoring the energy to its tower, it's time to move on, and there's always an island or two on the horizon to entice you.

PLAYED IT

In my hour or so with *Windbound*, the only sea dangers I had the pleasure of running into were reefs and angry sets of pincers, but there are plenty of other dangers to come in the full game. Developer 5 Lives Studios warns of bigger creatures lurking beneath the waves that will attack your boat if provoked. Thankfully though, controlling the ship is a dream, and skillfully navigating your vessel over rough waves and crashing tides gives you a better chance of taking on these ocean menaces.

5 Lives Studios says it really wanted to capture the feeling of freedom that sailing evokes, and I think *Windboud* does just that. When you're out at sea and your sails start to catch the wind it's an incredible feeling. Storywise it's a little thin, but the feeling of being out on the open water is great fun. I now have a need to build a boat that would be big enough to rival the Kon-Tiki, but I'll have to wait until *Windboud* is out later this month to make my vision a reality.

Rachel Watts


That island looks friendly – let's go there.

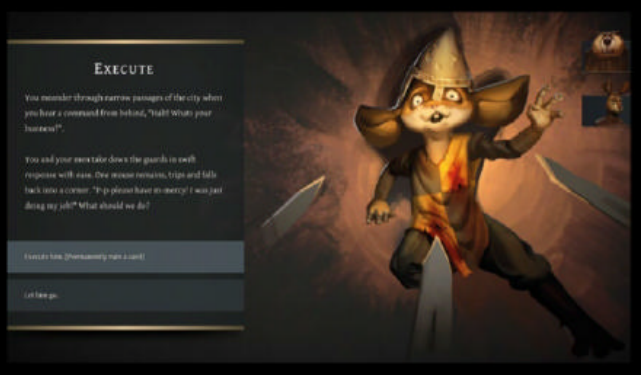
That's one fancy oar.

With all the parts you can craft, you can customise your boat however you like.

Stone towers are dotted all over the world's many islands.

Banners of Ruin

Name a more iconic duo. I'll wait.



Uh oh.

Enemy attacks are telegraphed in advance.

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
£15.50	MonteBearo	Goblinz Studio	montebearo.co.uk

BANNERS OF RUIN

The roguelike deckbuilder genre goes into beast mode

Redwall is a wonderful series of children's books, fusing woodland creatures with medieval fantasy. But author Brian Jacques was against videogames, which meant playing in that universe was strictly confined to wheeling around the garden between chapters. By now, though, all the kids who grew up on those novels are old enough to make their own.

I'd wager that MonteBearo, the two-man outfit behind *Banners of Ruin*, spent their childhood visiting the same library shelves I did. And I'd be willing to put down cold hard cash that they've spent more recent years in the same corners of the Steam library I frequent now. The result is a roguelike deckbuilding tactics game – think *Slay the Spire* with a splash of *Darkest Dungeon* – set in a world of chainmail-wearing weasels and beavers with maces.

And the game capitalises fully on that setting. I've spent a good chunk of my time with *Banners of Ruin* just sat on the menu screen, an animated painting with sun-soaked castles and, in the foreground, a mouse silhouetted on the ramparts, his banner (which shows no signs of ruin, actually) fluttering in the breeze. The rest of the game delivers on this promise – this is an impossibly gorgeous production for such a small team, all the way down to the smallest touches. Changing equipment is reflected on character models, and if you linger on the character select screen, you might catch your fearsome armoured bear wrinkling his nose.

This guy looks like he should be predicting six more weeks of winter, not battling.

THIS IS AN IMPOSSIBLY GORGEOUS PRODUCTION FOR SUCH A SMALL TEAM

And oh, the cards! These might be best-looking cards not only in videogames, but – I glance nervously over at the heaving board game shelves as I type this – that these eyes have ever seen. The art's wonderful, but it's the texture of the cards themselves that really gets me. The scuffed edges, the fact that each one seems to be housed in its own leather pouch… they'd be ludicrously impractical as a physical object but great Methuselah do I want to run my hands over them.

FUR REAL

But moving (reluctantly) beyond that menu screen, and into the game itself: it's very much a roguelike deckbuilder in the early days of Early Access. You pick your way along a path – in this case expressed by a choice of three cards laid down on the virtual table – selecting which fight or shop or text event you fancy next, constantly adding to your deck as you go. Battles are all about balancing the thrust of attack cards with making sure your defences can withstand enemy blows. There's a key difference here, for anyone familiar with *Slay the Spire*: block carries over from one turn to the next, meaning you can often stack it up early on and – enemy abilities willing – not worry about it again until it's been chipped away.

PLAYED IT

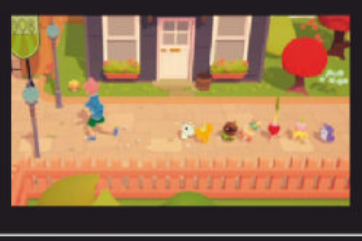
The biggest change, though, is that you're controlling a party arranged on a two-by-three grid. You've got a single deck but every bear or rabbit comes with their own mana pool, and certain cards can only be played by one character. And if they take too many hits, well, it's off to the permadeath farm they go. The loss hurts, not only because, y'know, they're a twitchy-nosed fluffer, but because it punches a massive hole in your strategy. I'm not proud to admit I've already rage-quit a couple of runs after losing one of my favourite fighters.

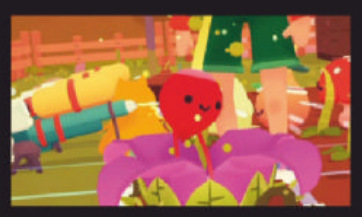
That's either the sign of a terribly frustrating roguelike or a great one. The decider, ultimately, will be how the game develops over Early Access, and whether the card pool – which currently hews a little close to well-worn strategies – can find fresh design space as it expands. Until then, well, *Banners of Ruin* will just have to get by on its good looks.

Alex Spencer

Ooblets

Fill this gift basket with gifts to please to Oob council. Yep, that's a thing.





NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
£20	Glumberland	In-house	ooblets.com

OOBLETS

This life-sim understands the comfort of setting your own pace

This creature collection adventure was first announced back in 2016 and many quickly fell in love with its echoes of *Pokémon*, *Animal Crossing*, and *Stardew Valley*. Now it's finally out, as an Epic Games Store exclusive and currently in the platform's version of Early Access – and it's been worth the wait.

After spending time with the characters and critters of *Ooblets* – crafting, gardening, dance battling, and so on – I've fallen deeply into the gentle rhythms and daily happenings in the world of Oob. It starts out like many life-sims do: you've arrived in a new town with nothing but the clothes on your back, hoping for a fresh start. Life in the sleepy seaside setting of Badgetown consists of chatting to characters, fulfilling quests, growing crops, and, of course, collecting lots of ooblets.

Ooblets may look cute, but they're also fierce... dancers. Collecting the different types of these cuties involves challenging wild ooblets to a dance battle. If you win, the ooblet you beat will give you a seed, letting you grow one of the same type. These play out similarly to the card system in *Slay the Spire*. They're turn-based affairs where you play cards to make your ooblet bust out a dance and to score points. The first group to gain a certain number of points wins. Each ooblet has special dance moves which place certain cards in your deck, so choosing different ooblets in your squad tailors your deck for how you like to play.

Ooblets' garden mode lets you plant and water with ease.

YOU'VE ARRIVED IN A NEW TOWN WITH NOTHING BUT THE CLOTHES ON YOUR BACK

After getting your well-earned seed, the next step is to plant it. You can grow ooblets and a whole host of different crops in the plot of land next to your home. After plucking weeds, removing rocks, and turning the soil you're ready to start gardening. *Ooblets*' approach to growing plants is a little different to other farming games like *Stardew Valley*. Normally, I would tend to my crops as soon as I woke up so then I could go on with my day, but in *Ooblets*, groups of crops can bloom anytime throughout the day. I like this system, because it helps you break out of self-imposed schedules that life-sims encourage and asks you to have a more easy-going attitude.

COMMUNITY SERVICE

Outside your plot of land, the residents of Badgetown are waiting with a seemingly never-ending list of jobs that you can help out with. There are gift baskets to complete, characters to befriend, buildings to fix up, houses to furnish, clothes to buy, badges to collect – it goes on and on. Completing these quests unlocks new buildings and areas to explore, and the world of Oob begins to open up. How quickly you achieve these goals is completely up to you, it's not like the residents of this sleepy town are going anywhere.

PLAYED IT

The overall tone of *Ooblets* leans very much into a cutesy eccentricity that fits perfectly with its bubblegum visuals. It's clear that it doesn't take itself too seriously, with humour akin to *Wattam*, the *Frog Detective* series, or Sokpop's bite-size games, but the language it uses can come across a little too cutesy, like a milkshake with too much syrup. Froobtoses, hop dobs, nurnines, sporbets, curlyhorns, and clothlets – lists end up sounding like a Dr Seuss book.

While these names can be confusing, the overall vibe of *Ooblets* is nothing short of charming. It's a game that understands the comforting cycle of completing small quests and the satisfaction that players find in that – it's a feature that it shares with far bigger budget open-world games. There are small visual hiccups here and there, but *Ooblets* in Early Access already boasts a solid build that lets you farm, craft, and dance for days.

Rachel Watts

GO TO

HELL

BALDUR'S GATE III is taking us to dark places, and it's making darkness a mechanic too.

By Jeremy Peel

"Go to hell," says Gale. The usually cocksure wizard and optional player character of *Baldur's Gate III* stares down the flames of the party's campfire. This is a man whose leather-bound chest conceals a Netherese Destruction Orb which, given time to count down, will produce a nuclear-level explosion, ripping him apart – yet he still gets up every morning to turn a phrase and find his next spell. Tonight, though, he's brooding. The events of the last three days have given even him cause for concern.

"Go to hell," he repeats. "It's an everyday expression. So trivial it's almost meaningless. But we've seen hell. It's real, and it isn't trivial." Like the rest of the party, Gale has endured a kidnapping. He has survived the crash of a flying slave ship crewed by mind flayers. And, even now that he has escaped, he remains the unwilling surrogate to a tentacled baby that will kill him on birth. Likely very painfully, before the week is out. It's hard to think of anything much more hellish.

Yet Gale isn't speaking figuratively when he says he's seen hell. As it turns out, *Baldur's Gate III* actually begins in hell. More specifically, the first layer of the Nine Hells, Avernus.

DEMONIC INFLUENCE

Over the last year, tabletop D&D fans have been playing through the prequel to *Baldur's Gate III*, *Descent into Avernus*. They've already participated in the Blood War, a perpetual struggle that rages between demons and devils, a Warhammer-like vision of infinite conflict. Now we'll step between the battle lines ourselves, both in the intro of Larian's Early Access build in late September, and during a much longer sequence of the finished game.

Demons and devils, it's important to note, aren't synonyms in the Forgotten Realms. While Wizards of the Coast is wisely moving away from some of the more reductive race alignments in its history – those of the orcs and drow in particular – nobody has better embodied the term 'lawful evil' than its devils.

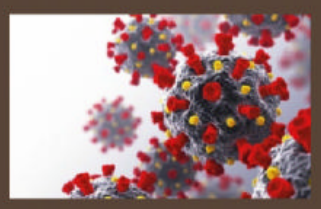
"I strongly suspect that Wizards based devils on lawyers," Larian Studios head Swen Vincke tells me. "They have a whole code of laws, and when you make a pact, the pact is holy. You have to be very careful about the wording of the contract."

Devils are notorious for not providing mortals with a copy of their contract unless they are pressed on the issue. In fact, the more I read about devils, the more familiar they seem, and the less I'm convinced they're restricted solely to the Forgotten Realms.

NOT SO EARLY ACCESS

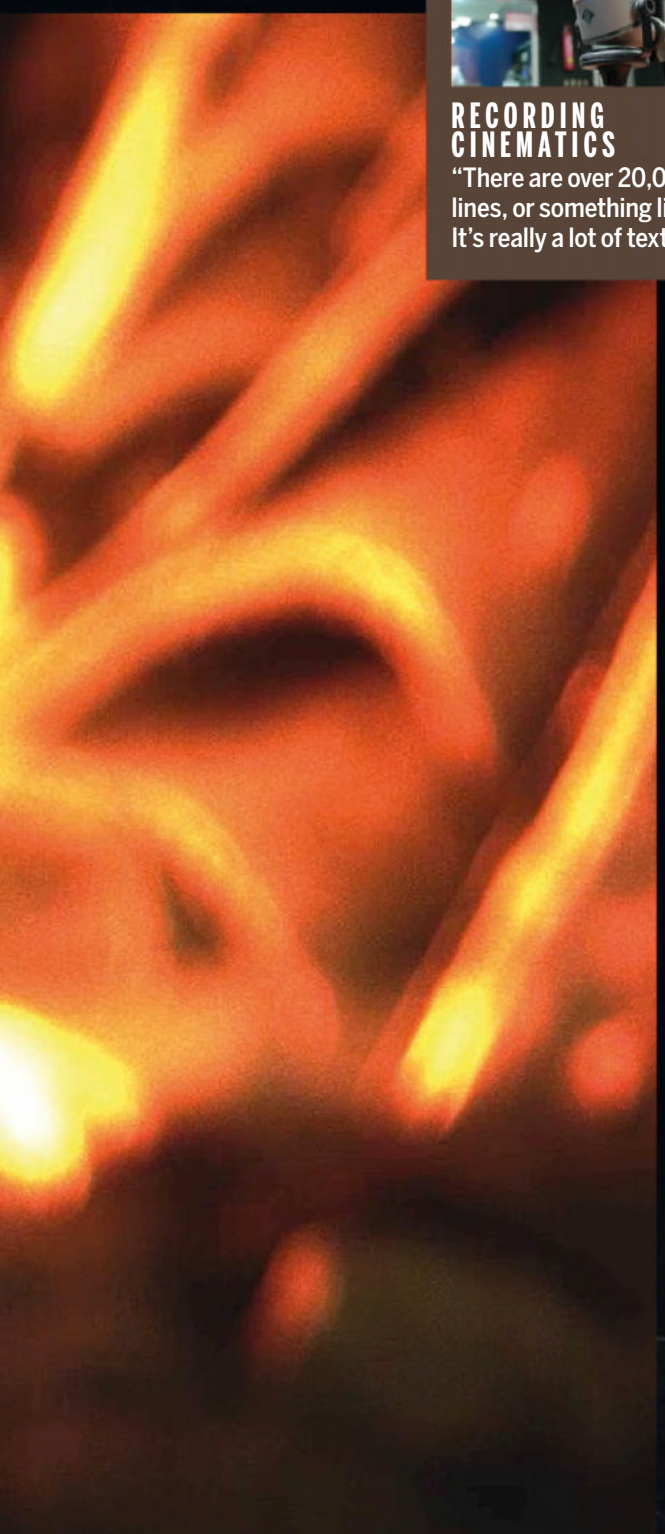
Why "maybe August" became late September

RECORDING CINEMATICS
"There are over 20,000 NPC lines, or something like that. It's really a lot of text."



CORONAVIRUS COVID-19
"We had a few people infected, but luckily for us, nobody was heavily sick."

"IT'S A LOT OF WORK"
"Trying to close things, given the quantity of content in there, is proving challenging."



TOP: Forced turn-based mode is perfect for dodging traps outside of battle.

If you've watched Larian's public presentations to date, you'll have seen a devil in *Baldur's Gate III* already – a sinister noble who introduces himself as Raphael, before transporting the player to the scene of a decadent feast. There, Raphael reveals his true form. He's come to prey on your desperation, offering to remove the baby mind flayer from your brain in exchange for your soul upon death.

"Try to cure yourself," he purrs, "Shop around. Beg, borrow, and steal. When hope has been whittled down to the very marrow of despair – that's when you'll come knocking on my door."

DEVILS COLLECT SOULS THAT ARE NEEDED TO FUEL THE BLOOD WAR

ORDER AND CHAOS

Devils collect souls that are needed to fuel the Blood War, which they fight to keep demons out of the lower levels of hell. If the devils represent order, the demons are being of pure chaos. They are equally evil, yet ideologically opposed.

It's this world that we'll crash through in a flaming nautiloid – the aforementioned mind flayer slave ship. You may remember that a nautiloid attacked the city of Baldur's Gate in the game's cinematic intro, which doubled as its reveal trailer. The vessel began slurping up the citizenry with its tentacles, so that they could become hosts for a new generation of mind flayers. But the attack was interrupted by three reptilian githyanki, each riding a red dragon. As the dragons started tearing the nautiloid apart, a mind flayer pilot attempted to evade by steering the ship through a narrow snowy fissure. Baldur's Gate's very own trench run.

The demo PC Gamer saw for our last cover story began at a nautiloid crash site, and it was natural to assume that one scene led directly to the other. But Larian has given us a look at a CGI sequence that slots right in the middle.

Aboard the damaged nautiloid, a githyanki prisoner pulls herself from her torched cage. Her name is Lae'zel – another possible companion and player character. "She is actually part of the githyanki that are following the nautiloid," explains Vincke. "She knows who they are."

Lae'zel then looks out through a new window torn in the ship's shell, and sees... the three numerals of the title *Baldur's Gate III*, which are

LEFT: It's a treat to see the Sword Coast wilder than ever.

RIGHT: Astarion is centuries old, having served a sadistic vampire master.

floating above the volcanic landscape. "You'll have to ask the director of the CGI movie about that," Vincke laughs. "That suddenly popped up and we all said, 'Really, you're gonna put the III in there?'"

RAINING BLOOD

The enormous floating numerals are, in fact, hellfire engines – sentient technology the devils use to rain down lightning on the demons below, powered by soul coins. "The soul coin is basically made of a person's soul," Vincke says. "It's the currency of hell, it's how payment is done. You'll encounter soul coins early on in Act One. When you get into hell, soul coins are the thing."

First, though, the player will wake up aboard the nautiloid – either with Lae'zel, or as her – and fight to take it over, even as githyanki dragons and armies of imps clash above and below. We shouldn't expect an extended visit to hell in the Early Access release of *Baldur's Gate III* – Avernus is still "in construction", and will appear for a proper showing in a late segment of the finished game. But ultimately, it'll display all the societal complexity Larian worlds are known for, in an environment that Dungeons & Dragons games have rarely explored.

"You'll get a good sense of how the mechanics of hell work," Vincke says. "There's an element of perpetual fear and competition. There's a strict hierarchy, and the absolute rule of holy law. It allows us to do interesting moral situations and quests, and we tie it all into what's happening in the real world [above]. If you've accepted pacts that have been offered to you by devils throughout your adventure, that changes things a lot."

INFERNAL INFLATION

Comparing the numbers in Larian's Early Access builds

NPCs

Divinity: Original Sin II	*Baldur's Gate III*
130	600

LINES OF DIALOGUE

Divinity: Original Sin II	*Baldur's Gate III*
30,000	90,000

One of the primary themes of *Baldur's Gate III* is trust, and what happens when it comes into conflict with the group's survival. At some stage, the devil Raphael will approach every single member of your party with an offer, like a cop interrogating a criminal gang. Every deal is different, and you won't know who's said yes to what. "It's gonna change, it's dynamic," Vincke says. "The consequences of that play out when you get to hell. You don't necessarily know if you still have fully loyal party members by then."

ANY KILLED CREATURE CAN BE ENTREATED FOR ANSWERS

DR DOLITTLE

Delicious late-game complications like these won't feature in the Early Access build, which includes just the first part of *Baldur's Gate III*. But that build will be pretty sizeable nonetheless, housing hundreds more NPCs than Early Access *Divinity: Original Sin II*, and almost three times as many lines of dialogue.

Those numbers shouldn't be interpreted as an indication of physical scale, but rather options. "It's really because of the different bifurcations in the story," Vincke says, "and how much more branching there is than in *DOSII*."

Much of that divergence comes from the tadpole living in your head, and whether or not you choose to embrace its powers. Then there's D&D's Speak with Dead spell, which Larian has gone a couple of extra miles beyond the veil to support; any killed creature which still has a mouth left on its head can be entreated for answers about the manner in which it died. "The dialogue count went up because of the full support for those features," Vincke says. "The rule hasn't changed since *Original Sin I* – if we put

something in there, it has to be fully supported across the entire game."

Fans of the Pet Pal talent in *Divinity* will be well served in *Baldur's Gate III*. Those with the equivalent D&D gift can hold forth with any animal in the game. And if you're skilled in Animal Handling, that'll open up its own possibilities too. A dog found mourning its master may join you in camp, following you around the Realms. And down in the Underdark, you can commune with the rothé, beasts of burden for the grey dwarves, the Duergar.

During your travels, you can assault a Duergar fortress to free a group of captured deep gnomes – and using Animal Handling, could rile up the rothé and unleash them on their masters, thinning their considerable ranks.

"If you want to replay the Early Access, you'll be able to get quite a lot of different adventures just by taking different pathways and making different decisions," Vincke says. "You're never going to experience them all at once, it's always going to be a fraction based on the choices you've made."

ULTIMA HEAVEN

You may know that Larian's commitment to coherent systems is rooted in Vincke's deep love for *Ultima VII*, the granddaddy of RPGs. Less referenced is his other key formative influence: Looking Glass and *Ultima Underworld*. *Baldur's Gate III* shares fundamental DNA with immersive sims like *Thief* and *Deus Ex*, and you can see that in the stealth system Larian has added since first revealing the game.

Shadows are no longer purely aesthetic, but the key to getting through a section unspotted. Your cursor will tell you whether you're lightly or heavily obscured, and allow you to get away with sitting in the vision cones of enemies – though they'll get a bonus to spot you if they are, for instance, an elf with darkvision.

SHADOWS ARE NO LONGER PURELY AESTHETIC, BUT THE KEY TO STEALTH

"The engine programmers looked at us very evilly when we came up with that one," Vincke says. "Luckily for us, they're pretty clever people. Now it's a very natural thing."

Thanks to the environmental interplay baked into the *Divinity* engine, we'll be able to create more shadows, by using water to douse torches. That might draw unwanted attention, of course, but a wizard in the party could cast an illusion as a distraction. Or, failing that, simply make a really loud noise to pull the guards away.

LEFT: The party is pushed together by its shared dire circumstance: everyone's got brain tadpoles.

RIGHT: It's fitting that *Baldur's Gate III*, a cousin of the immersive sim, hugs the rafters.

SIGHT UNSEEN

By employing *Baldur's Gate III*'s forced turn-based mode – which treats every six seconds of non-combat time as a 'move' – stealth specialists can tug at all of these strings to move about the Realms unseen by enemies.

Why bother? Well, you could steal valuables from a faction and still remain friends. Or, perhaps better still, take up an advantageous position before battle and effectively get a free turn – one in which you might use the game's set of D&D verbs to 'shove' an archer off a ledge.

So, in other words, the layering of the systems Larian has already piled into its engine makes *Baldur's Gate III*, with the addition of light and dark, an instant stealth game. Well, almost instant...

"The level designers have had to iterate multiple times as these systems came into play," Vincke says. "There's a great sense of verticality in the game, and the light and dark becomes part of that also, and it becomes intrinsically more complex. The Early Access content uses all of this together in what's hopefully going to be a beautiful symphony of systemic gameplay, in which you have to really pull all the registers to get the result that you want. Sorry, I'm getting excited about my own game." He is, but it's infectious.

Gale stands over the flames, his silhouette forming a shadow that could, conceivably, conceal an assassin. "Devils, dragons, mindflayers," he sighs. "These used to be abstracts. Pictures on a piece of paper."

That's the journey Dungeons & Dragons has undergone, from its first edition in a time before PC games, to the latest iteration of *Baldur's Gate III*. Larian has taken those pictures and blown them into three dimensions, granting scribbled monsters weight, sight and mouths with which to speak. It's dropped them into a Forgotten Realms where fire spreads, climbers fall, and darkness hides thieves from view. It has taken the abstract, and given it life. The Realms it's building are frightening, dangerous and volatile – and like Gale, I think we'll ultimately conclude they're pretty exciting too. ■

BELGIAN PROVERB CORNER

Translating Swen Vincke's expressions

"I don't want to sell the skin of the bear before the bear was shot" = ***I don't want to count my chickens before they've hatched*** = ***I think people are going to like* Baldur's Gate III*, but you never know***

PC GAMER

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PC GAMER

REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.
Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.
Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.
Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.
Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.
Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.
Examples *Primordia*, *Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.
Examples *No Man's Sky*, *Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.
Examples *Prey*, *NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.
Examples *Overwatch*, *Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.
Examples *Bayonetta*, *Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.
Examples *Half-Life 2*, *Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE

The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

Find out more
www.bit.ly/pcgreviews

Port of call

There was a time when the two games leading the charge in this month's reviews section would have been unthinkable. Sony-published PlayStation 4 exclusives making their way to PC? One of them published on PC by Sony themselves? Even two years ago no one would have believed you if you'd predicted it. Does that speak to a less guarded, closed-off Sony with the new generation of consoles? Well... maybe, but they did also just announce that *Marvel's Avengers* is going to lock the entire character of Spider-Man behind the bars of PlayStation exclusivity. While it's probably not very likely that we'll be playing *The Last of Us Part II* on PC this time next year, it's at least a sign that, in gaming, nothing is ever quite as certain as it seems. The only real constant in the industry these days is change. Oh, and battle passes.

ROBIN VALENTINE
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LET US KNOW WHAT YOU THINK
Email us via letters@pcgamer.com with your reactions, or simply tweet us your thoughts @PCGamer

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This month's robot-huntin' reviewers...

DAVID MEIKLEHAM
Specialist in
Dinosaurs, metal or otherwise
Currently playing
Horizon Zero Dawn
This month
Shot a lot of glowing weak points.

ANDY KELLY
Specialist in
Unwieldy backpacks
Currently playing
Death Stranding
This month
Had a blast with a game that seems to just be *Euro Truck Simulator* with no trucks.

RICK LANE
Specialist in
Knowing when to fold
Currently playing
Paper Beast
This month
Explored a world of origami animals. Presumably it never rains there.

DANIELLA LUCAS
Specialist in
Content farming
Currently playing
Story of Seasons: Friends of Mineral Town
This month
Combined romance and turnips.

JODY MACGREGOR
Specialist in
Caffeine and mortality
Currently playing
Necrobarista
This month
Finally got to leverage his Aussie heritage in a review.

TOM SYKES
Specialist in
Shirtless bonding
Currently playing
Hard Lads
This month
Learned a thing or two about manliness from a game about a YouTube video.

MATT ELLIOTT
Specialist in
Time management
Currently playing
Life is Strange
This month
Tried to convince us he was a teenager, once. We reckon he was born age 37.

ROBOT WARS

Go on a memorable sci-fi safari as you hunt down robotic big game in HORIZON ZERO DAWN. *By Dave Meikleham*

PC ports of Decima Engine games are a bit like buses. Except, of course, they're absolutely not. Sure, you might have waited impatiently for *Horizon Zero Dawn* and *Death Stranding* to show up on a rig near you, but now that both are here, these big-budget open world games are obviously nothing like sweaty forms of public transport. Despite sharing the same genre, these PS4 hits also offer polar opposite experiences.

Longtime PlayStation collaborator Guerrilla Games developed the engine behind both sandbox smashes, yet that's where the comparisons end. *Death Stranding* is a technical triumph, but it's also an example of a Hideo Kojima game at its most indulgent. Undeniably interesting, hugely silly, and often as boring as it is weirdly captivating, it's a brilliant but bloated passion project that's hard to pigeonhole and impossible to ignore. It's also nowhere near as exciting to play as *Horizon Zero Dawn*.

Compared to Kojima's post-apocalyptic postman sim, *Horizon* is more respectful of your free time. Rather than force you to traipse through wildernesses listening to warbling Icelandic indie tunes, Guerrilla's sprawling open world sends you off to slay robotic dinosaurs. I don't know about you, but I'd rather shoot a metallic pteranodon out of the skies with a tribal bow than watch virtual Norman Reedus mope about a Nordic-looking USA for 60 hours.

ALOY MEETS WORLD

If you missed the buzz surrounding *Horizon Zero Dawn*'s PS4 release back in 2017, here are the cliff notes. This is a systems-driven sandbox where you play Aloy – a tribal outcast with a chip on her shoulder and an undeniable talent for murdering robo beasties. Why are these mechanical monsters roaming lands that otherwise look like they were ripped straight from the set of One Million Years BC? Because *Horizon* is that rarest of creatures: a dystopian videogame that says something original about armageddon.

A dystopian videogame that says something original about armageddon

Rather than spin a story about naive tribespeople battling the evils of encroaching technology, *Horizon* has the guts to weave a tale that encompasses complex themes. Whether addressing abandonment issues or subjects as uncomfortable as ethnic cleansing, Guerrilla Games demonstrates a level of nuanced, mature storytelling it never came close to hitting with its *Killzone* series on PlayStation consoles.

It helps that *Mass Effect*-style conversation wheels give you a little agency over Aloy's temperament. Almost every main mission and sidequest lets you answer questions from NPCs with either a thoughtful, heartfelt, or cold response. While your decisions never really affect the overarching story, these moment-to-moment choices draw you closer to Aloy. It's a smart design decision that makes it easier to invest in *Horizon*'s (initially emotionally distant) world.

It's to *Horizon*'s credit that it manages to turn a story involving glorified cave people and robot monstrosities into a coherent and moving tale. Just because your open world has a mildly absurd premise doesn't mean you can't deliver a satisfying story. *Maneater*, take note.

The real crowning glory of *Horizon*? Those magnificent machines. Spanning velociraptor-like Watchers to lumbering Thunderjaws – a colossal apex predator that would dwarf a T-Rex – the game's inquisitive creatures prove a joy to fight. Displaying that dumb yet sort of clever brand of AI *Far Cry* enemies have been flaunting for over a decade, *Horizon*'s machines are easy to manipulate yet hard to put down. Using Aloy's unlikely, at first out of place, augmented earpiece – don't worry, it makes more sense as the story unravels – she can track the patrol routes of her hefty foes then either choose to control or kill them.

Sneak up on a Strider, then hack its systems to turn the stocky beast into a mostly obedient mount. Blast a Thunderjaw's turret from its mighty back, courtesy of Aloy's dead-eye Sharpshot arrows, before forcing it to the ground with electrifying tripwires. Expose a colossal metal crab's vulnerable innards, then revel in crustacean cruelty as you light it up with flaming projectiles. Thanks

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An open world adventure set on a futuristic Earth where tribes battle robots

EXPECT TO PAY
£36

DEVELOPER
Guerrilla Games

PUBLISHER
PlayStation Mobile

REVIEWED ON
Intel i7-8700K CPU, GTX 2080 Ti, 32GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
amd.com/en/gaming/horizon-zero-dawn

JAW AND ORDER *How to put down a mighty Thunderjaw*

1 *Horizon*'s apex predator rocks a Challenge Level of 32, so make sure you've unlocked plenty of combat abilities.

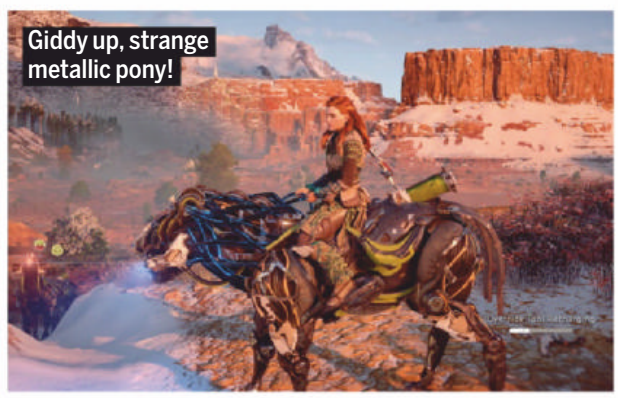
2 Don't use shock damage – they're resistant to that. In fact they have no elemental weakness.

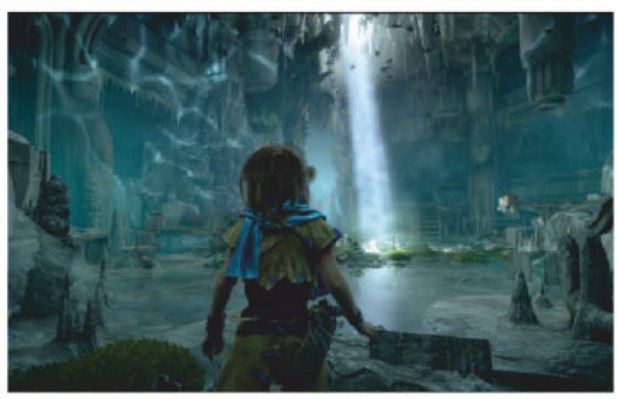
3 Aim for a Thunderjaw's Data Nexus, its eyes, and the huge predator's heart.

4 When you first start fighting one, try to shoot off its deadly Disc Launchers using Aloy's short-ranged Tearblaster.

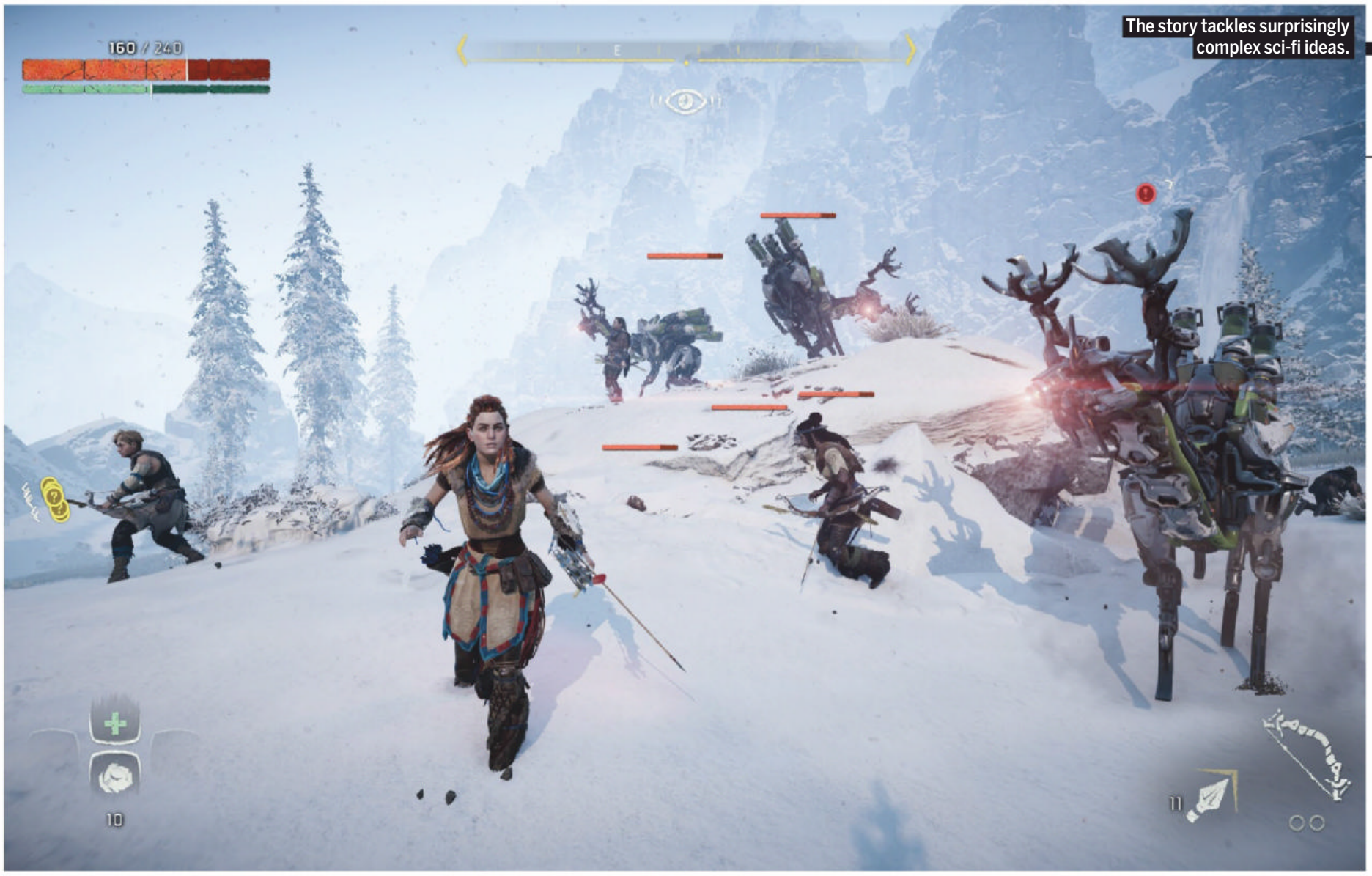
Watchers are ever vigilant. Avoid their pesky gaze.

Cheer up, Aloy. It's not like the world is overrun by robo dinos.

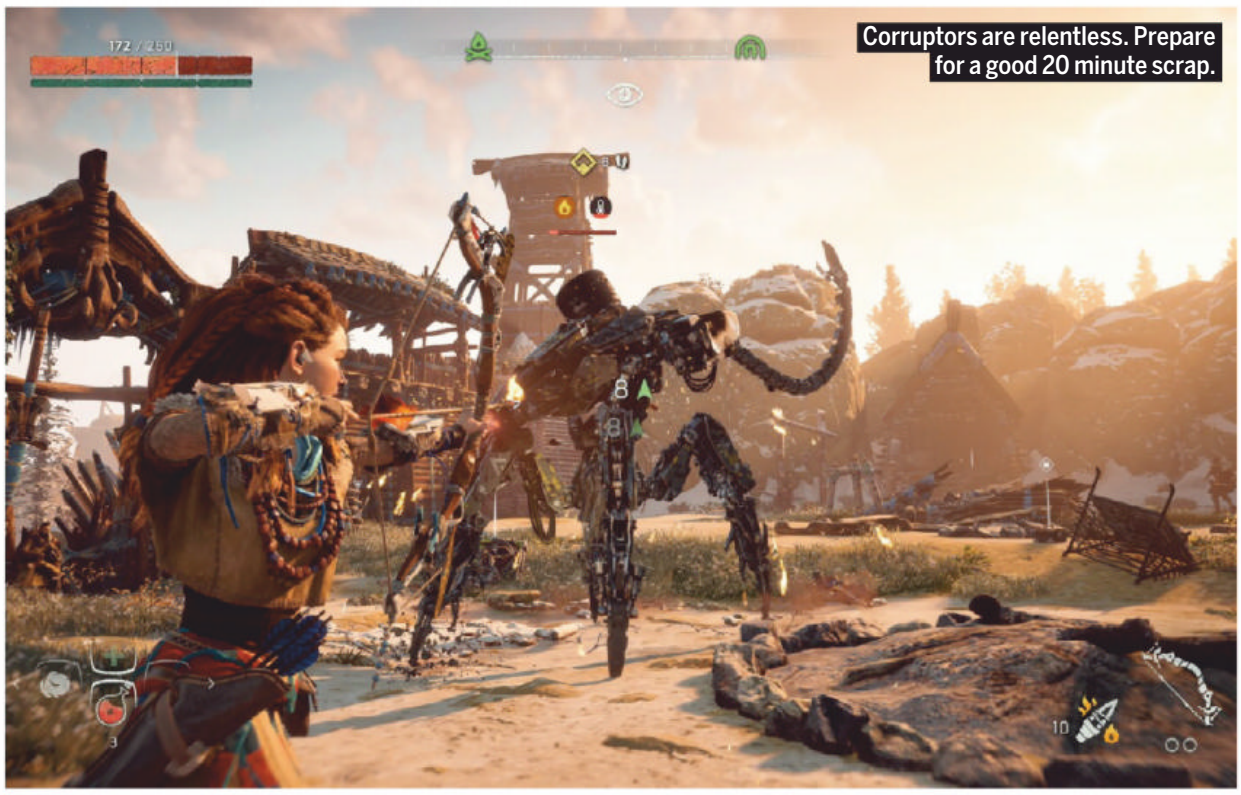

Giddy up, strange metallic pony!



Aloy's Focus headgear is handy for highlighting useful items.

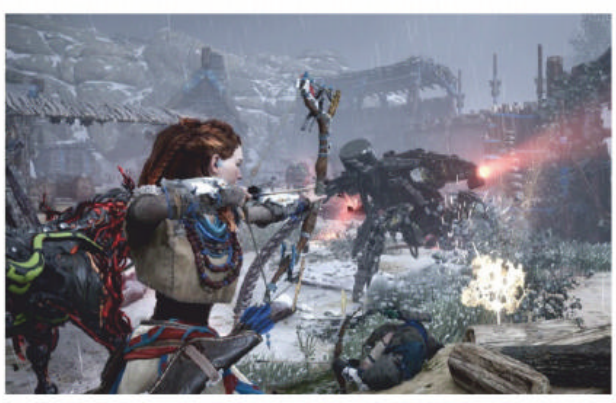


The story tackles surprisingly complex sci-fi ideas.



Corruptors are relentless. Prepare for a good 20 minute scrap.

Take a guess which part of the Bellowback you should aim for.



Climbing a Tallneck plays out as a platforming puzzle.

» to a varied arsenal and an equally inventive array of enemies, *Horizon*'s girl-on-goliath fights never get old.

It's also fascinating to see these mechanical wonders simply interact with their environment when they think you're not looking. Like the odd magic moment where you come across a wild stallion playfully rolling around in the morning dew of *Red Dead Redemption*'s wetlands, *Horizon*'s beasts can enthrall with the same style of naturalistic behaviour. Well, if you can call a 45-foot android crocodile slithering into a lake natural. One moment you might observe jittery packs of elk-like Broadheads munching on knee high grass, because apparently robots need to eat too. The next, you might witness a group of smaller machines scurrying out of the path of a deadly Ravager, as *Horizon*'s three-ton puma sniffs around for its next likely mechanised meal.

TALL TALES

Most captivating of all? Those moments where you crane the camera skywards to admire a lumbering Tallneck leisurely stomping around a set perimeter. These magnificent leviathans more or less work like walking versions of *Far Cry*'s antenna towers, uncovering areas of the map once you clamber up and hack their satellite skulls. They're among the most awe-inspiring creatures I've seen in any game. The first time I encountered one, I may as well have been a flummoxed Alan Grant fumbling to shake off his shades after drinking in the sight of Jurassic Park's grazing brachiosaurus.

They're among the most awe-inspiring creatures I've seen in a game

Encounters with Aloy's fellow humans don't fare quite so well. When *Horizon* first launched on console three years ago, there's no denying it was a little derivative. In 2020, those overly familiar notes are even more out of tune. Clearly Aloy copied *Far Cry 3* when they were both taking that course in Enemy Strongholds 101, because her map is dotted with encampments you're encouraged to capture through repetitive stealth takedowns and silent bow kills. What makes these samey, if inoffensive assaults worthwhile? The dangling promise of more XP and unlocking fresh machine-taming abilities.

Want to earn that fancy stealth drop that will let you plummet 50ft without being heard or open up that skill that lets Aloy draw her bow in slow-motion whenever she jumps? You better murder every primitive bad guy in that nearby camp with the minimum of fuss. These base-conquering quests appear all over, so it's a shame they never showcase the sort of streamlined sneaky confidence Ubisoft finally hit with *Far Cry 5*. Aloy is great at swiping oversized machines down in wide open plains, but plonk her in a boxy camp with guards who can swarm from all sides, and she's nowhere near as competent a fighter.

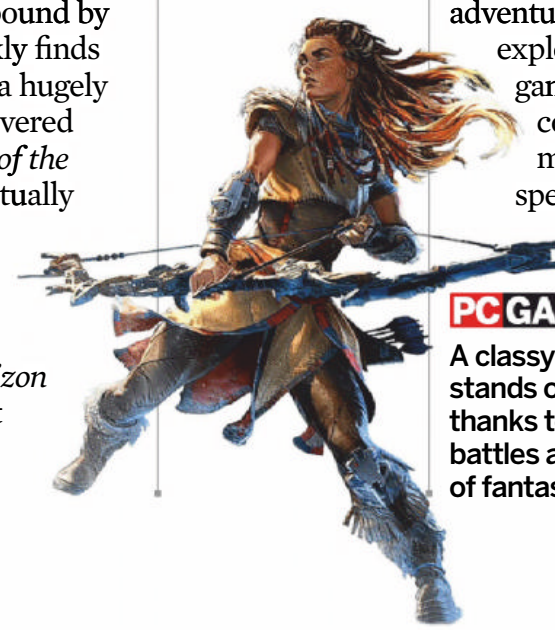
Horizon Zero Dawn's world is a lot more interesting than Hope County, though. Alongside *The Witcher 3*, this is one of the most intriguing, believably lived-in open worlds on PC. While the opening hours point to the sort of generic, frost-covered environment so many hypothermia-courting games have already covered, *Horizon*'s gorgeous world quickly proves itself to be one of the most visually varied around.

As the story progresses and the restrictions Aloy has been bound by lift, the badass hunter quickly finds her feet scampering across a hugely diverse landscape. Snow-covered wastelands that outdo *Rise of the Tomb Raider*'s tundras eventually give way to baking prairies that could pass for one of *Red Dead Redemption 2*'s sweltering deserts.

Early signs point to *Horizon* being a slightly inconsistent PC port, though. Several of the team have played the game across a variety of hardware, and the results are strangely patchy. Happily for our features producer James Davenport, he ran *Horizon* at a mostly consistent 60fps at 1440p resolution on an RTX 2080 GPU. Yet on my setup? Despite playing Aloy's machine-murdering sandbox on a 2080 Ti with a beefy CPU, I experienced framerates that seesawed between the mid 40s and low 50s at the same resolution. Hoping to play *Horizon* in 4K with performance beyond what the PS4 version can offer? You may be out of luck. The best I could manage at 2160p on a mix of medium and high settings was a stuttering experience that ranged from 25fps to 40fps.

At time of writing day one AMD and Nvidia driver updates have yet to be released, so let's hope these can iron out the bumpy performance issues I've witnessed. Patches or not though, *Horizon* isn't as well optimised as its Decima sibling *Death Stranding*. I wish every new game supported Nvidia's DLSS, and had the buttery framerates the new rendering resolution shows off in Kojima's polarising open world.

While *Horizon*'s PC port can't quite go toe-to-toe with the likes of RDR2's conversion, this is still a highly polished, top-tier open world adventure. Though it lifts stealth and exploration elements from other games, Aloy's imaginative combat and captivating metallic foes ensure the time I spent with *Horizon* will burn bright in my memory. ■



PC GAMER VERDICT

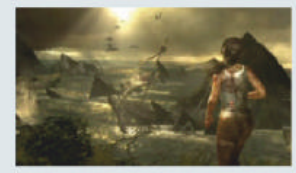
A classy sandbox that stands out from the pack thanks to its brilliant battles against an array of fantastic beasts.

86

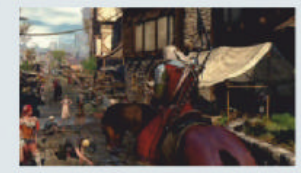
WHAT IS HORIZON ZERO DAWN?

The bits and pieces I can recognise in Guerrilla Games' sci-fi sandbox

FAR CRY PRIMAL
A primitive world? Check. Aggressive beasts? Check. Slightly repetitive enemy camps to clear out? Triple check.



TOMB RAIDER (2013)
Aloy may not be quite as gloomy as rebooted Lara, but both these explorers spend a good deal of time clambering up cliffs.



THE WITCHER 3
Two fantasy worlds linked by their nomadic leads. That said, Roach is a more reliable mount than the Striders Aloy can control.

ARK: SURVIVAL EVOLVED
Like *Horizon*, sci-fi gizmos and dinosaurs clash. Though *Horizon*'s engine is much superior.

STRAND AND DELIVER

Become a post-apocalyptic postman in DEATH STRANDING. *By Andy Kelly*

It's best when *Death Stranding* shuts up. Being a game by Hideo Kojima, it's naturally filled with bizarre characters, lengthy screeds of exposition, and indulgent cutscenes. But it's in the long, quiet stretches between all this, when it's just you hiking alone across a stark, haunting post-apocalyptic wilderness, where it really shines. In these moments, *Death Stranding* is quite unlike anything I've ever experienced in a game – or any other medium for that matter.

That's not to say there's no value in the plot. When you're not being bombarded with backstory, it's pretty interesting – and deeply weird. You are Sam Porter Bridges, a courier delivering cargo across what's left of the United States. A supernatural cataclysm called the Death Stranding has driven the last of humanity underground, leaving the surface plagued by soul-sucking ghosts called BTs and rain that ages anything it hits.

Your mission is to hike across North America, connecting scattered settlements as you go. Why Sam, though? He's a talented porter with a reputation for getting things delivered on time. But, more importantly, he can detect otherwise invisible BTs with the help of a tiny, creepy baby strapped to his chest.

The majority of your time in *Death Stranding* is spent out in the open, plodding slowly from one place to another. It's essentially a feature-length fetch quest. But the environment, and the challenges it throws at you, makes these trips worthwhile. The landscape is serenely beautiful, with a grand sense of scale and a bewitching atmosphere.

But it's not just for show. *Death Stranding* is secretly a brilliant hiking and mountaineering simulator, and every piece of rough terrain you encounter is a puzzle to be solved. If you rush things, Sam can trip, stagger, lose his balance, get swept away by powerful rivers, or slide down steep inclines – losing or damaging cargo in the process.

Most of the game is spent out in the field, delivering packages

Some jobs seem impossible at first. Standing at the foot of a mountain, snow whipping at its peaks, fragile cargo stuck to every inch of your suit, you wonder how you'll ever get over it. Along the way you might have to slip into *Metal Gear Solid* mode and sneak past BTs, or deal with extreme weather, including disorientating blizzards. You might even get knocked out by terrorists and have your cargo stolen, forcing you to sneak into their camp and take it back. But after all that, you make it, and it feels incredible.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A post-apocalyptic cargo delivery sim

EXPECT TO PAY
£55

DEVELOPER
Kojima Productions

PUBLISHER
505 Games

REVIEWED ON
RTX 2080 Super, Intel i7-9700K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
www.deathstranding.com

TAKE A HIKE

If this sounds like a lot of hard work, well, it is. But one of my favourite things about *Death Stranding* is how it drip-feeds you new gadgets and tools to make things easier. However, you can only carry so much stuff at once, so there's a strategic element to deciding which gear to take before you embark on a long delivery.

But you're never alone out there. *Death Stranding*'s most overt theme is connection, and this manifests itself in some brilliantly clever asynchronous multiplayer. As players traverse their world, dropping ladders and ropes, or using a device called a PCC to build river-spanning bridges, battery-boosting generators, ziplines, roads, and other helpful objects, these then appear in other people's games – including yours.

Disappointingly, story is *Death Stranding*'s weak link. The broad strokes are great, and Sam's mission to connect a fragmented civilisation is an effective hook. But so much of the finer details are told in uninteresting ways, whether it's through lengthy cutscenes, overlong text-heavy emails, or rambling radio chatter.

Thankfully, most of the game is spent out in the field, delivering packages, and battling the elements. But a parade of seemingly never-ending cinematics towards the end really tested my patience.

Ultimately, every misgiving I have about *Death Stranding* is snuffed out by the magnificence of hiking across that sweeping, rugged wilderness. It's a really slow game with an almost comical amount of backtracking. Yet, somehow, it kept me interested all the way through. ■

METAL GEAR *Tools of the trade*

ODRADEK
A shoulder-mounted device that scans terrain and, with the help of a Bridge Baby, reveals the shimmering outline of nearby BTs.

FLOATING VARRIER
Sometimes you'll have too much cargo to carry, which is where this floating platform comes in. You can even jump on it and surf down slopes.

REVERSE TRIKE
A fast-moving motorcycle that can move at high speeds across flat terrain. The two front wheels can be combined into one to go even faster.

LADDER
Sometimes all you need is a ladder. These ones are portable and extendable, and you'll be using them all the way through the game to climb mountains.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Slow, weird, and indulgent, but a true original, and a journey that will linger in your mind long after it's over.

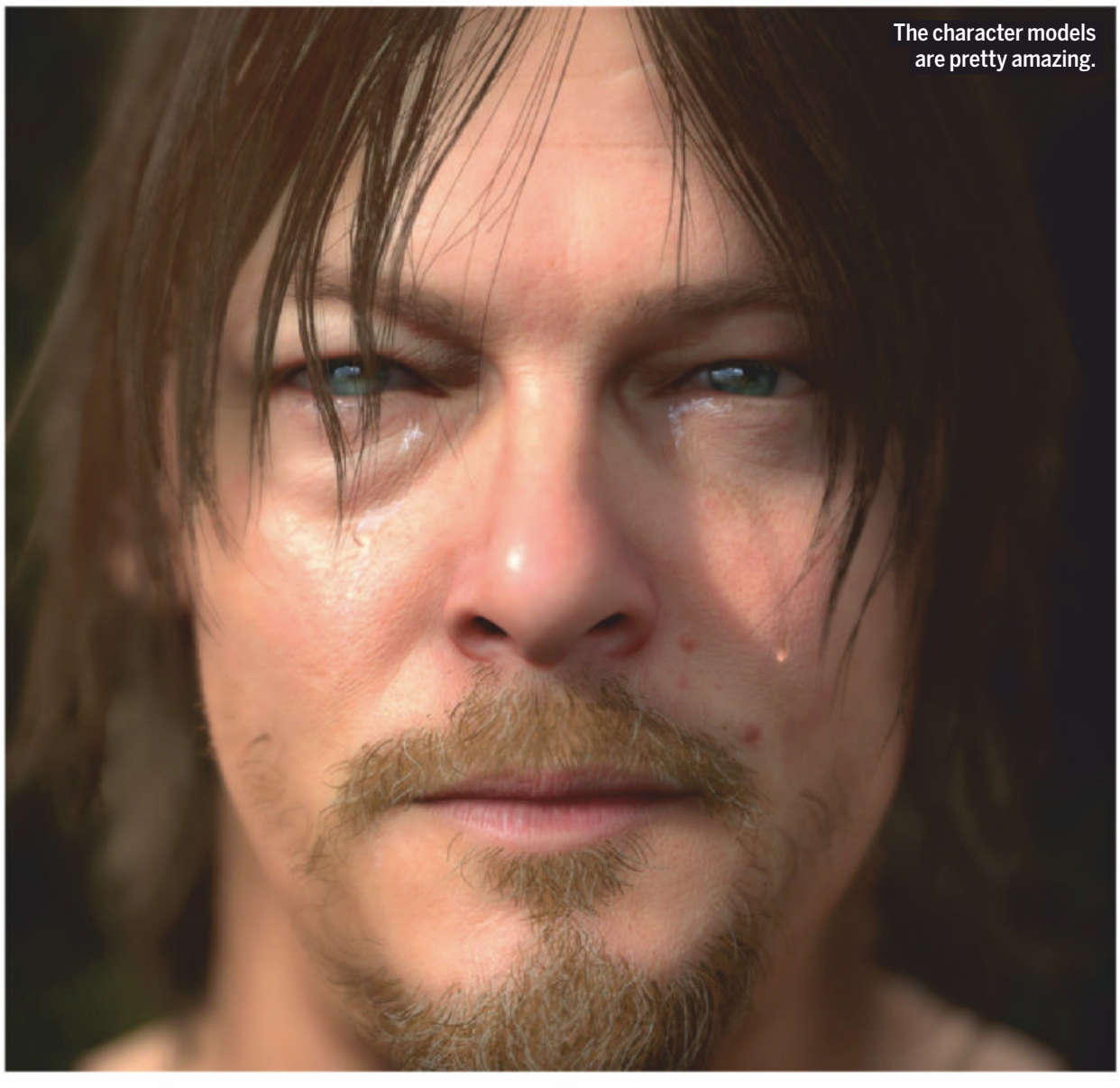
85

The world's more Iceland than North America.

The electric trike's battery doesn't last long.

The scale of the world is impressive.

Fragile isn't as delicate as her name suggests.


The character models are pretty amazing.

CITY SLICKER

BEYOND A STEEL SKY builds a LINC to the past. *By Ian Evenden*

The 1994 adventure game *Beneath A Steel Sky* was considered quite good (like 91 percent good), and to call it fondly remembered would be an understatement. A collaboration between Revolution Software and comic-book artist Dave Gibbons, it addressed social divides, consumerism, and totalitarian control through pointing, clicking, and solving puzzles. And now, in 2020 of all years, it gets a sequel.

The last time protagonist Robert Foster was in Union City it was under the benevolent authority of his pal Joey. Ten years later, he's dragged back to find it's now under the control of The Council, and that everyone is *really happy*. They've got to be, because their lives hang on their Qdos scores. It's nudge theory run rampant, as things like turning up for work and taking part in daily votes alter your score, which affects where you can go and how low in the towering arcologies you can live. Thumb-obsessed murderers and genius hackers lurk among the Monty Python-quoting droids and piles of junk at the tips of the steaming spires, their dimly lit world of furnaces and garbage crushers in stark contrast to the bright, wide plazas lower down.

Of course, this world of hi-tech Eloi and Morlocks wouldn't be the same without a dark secret, as an opening sequence involving screaming kidnapped children makes clear. Layers of high crimes and misdemeanours peel back to expose the twisted logic at their core like something from a monstrous episode of Black Mirror. While *Beneath A Steel Sky* showed that a sick society could be saved by a good man (or robot), *Beyond* sees a utopia exposed and torn down, the nobility and enormity of its characters setting them against one another.

Like something from monstrous episode of Black Mirror

Beyond might as well have been called *Beneath Beneath a Steel Sky*, such is the enormous shadow it chooses to live in. It burns brightly in spite of this – the lightly cel-shaded art has never looked better, and the update from point-and-click to WASD is a positive choice. The narrative wraps itself around that of the first game, although it doesn't matter if you haven't played it (but you should).

Knowing references abound. *Beyond* tackles the curiously British voice-acting with a history lesson stating many of the city's builders came from Hull – the city in which much of the '90s game development work took place. There's a throwaway line about an industrialist wearing a nice coat. Then comes a biggie, "Reboots are fine," says one character, who's possibly Welsh, "but they're never a patch on the original". There's even a museum dedicated to the world of the first game.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A belated sequel to 1994 cyberpunk adventure game *Beneath a Steel Sky*

EXPECT TO PAY
£30

DEVELOPER
Revolution Software

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Windows 10, Threadripper 2950X, 64GB RAM, GTX 1070Ti.

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
revolution.co.uk

TECH TROUBLE

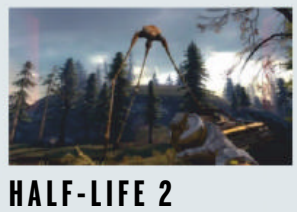
Unreal 4 means the game runs very nicely. Unfortunately, it also brings weird graphical glitches such as characters walking into you when you're having a conversation, your long coat clipping through whatever you're next to, and a whole virtual world level that judders violently whenever the camera moves. Unable to jump, Foster gets stuck on absolutely everything, even the outstretched leg of a corpse on the ground. The subtitles are also full of typos, with the occasional errant question mark perhaps attributable to AQI, but not the misplaced apostrophes, multiple spaces between words, and misspellings.

There are failures of logic too, odd for a game whose denouement is tied up in paradox and reasoning. Puzzles can plunge into a maddening game of throwing every switch and trying every object with everything in your inventory (though there is a hint system if you're really stuck). An empty light socket looks very much like every other one. Why is there an electric fence behind the waterfall? How can Foster hide in lockers but not enter toilet cubicles?

Moments of head-scratching are nothing new in adventure games and they do nothing to detract from the superb world Revolution has constructed. Is it a patch on the original? No: an upgrade. It's destined to have less cultural impact thanks to the recursion of its influences, and *Beneath*'s innovations having been adopted by the wider industry, but this is surely the best 11 hours you can spend in the Australian desert. ■

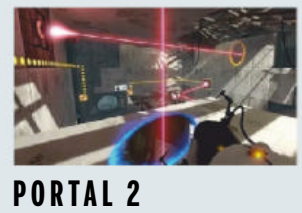
GOING BEYOND *Titles we were reminded of as we played*

CYBERPUNK 2077
Such a near-future city can go by no other name.



HALF-LIFE 2
The crowbar and androids send the mind to City 17.

BIOSHOCK INFINITE
A sky city with a secret? Sounds like Columbia.

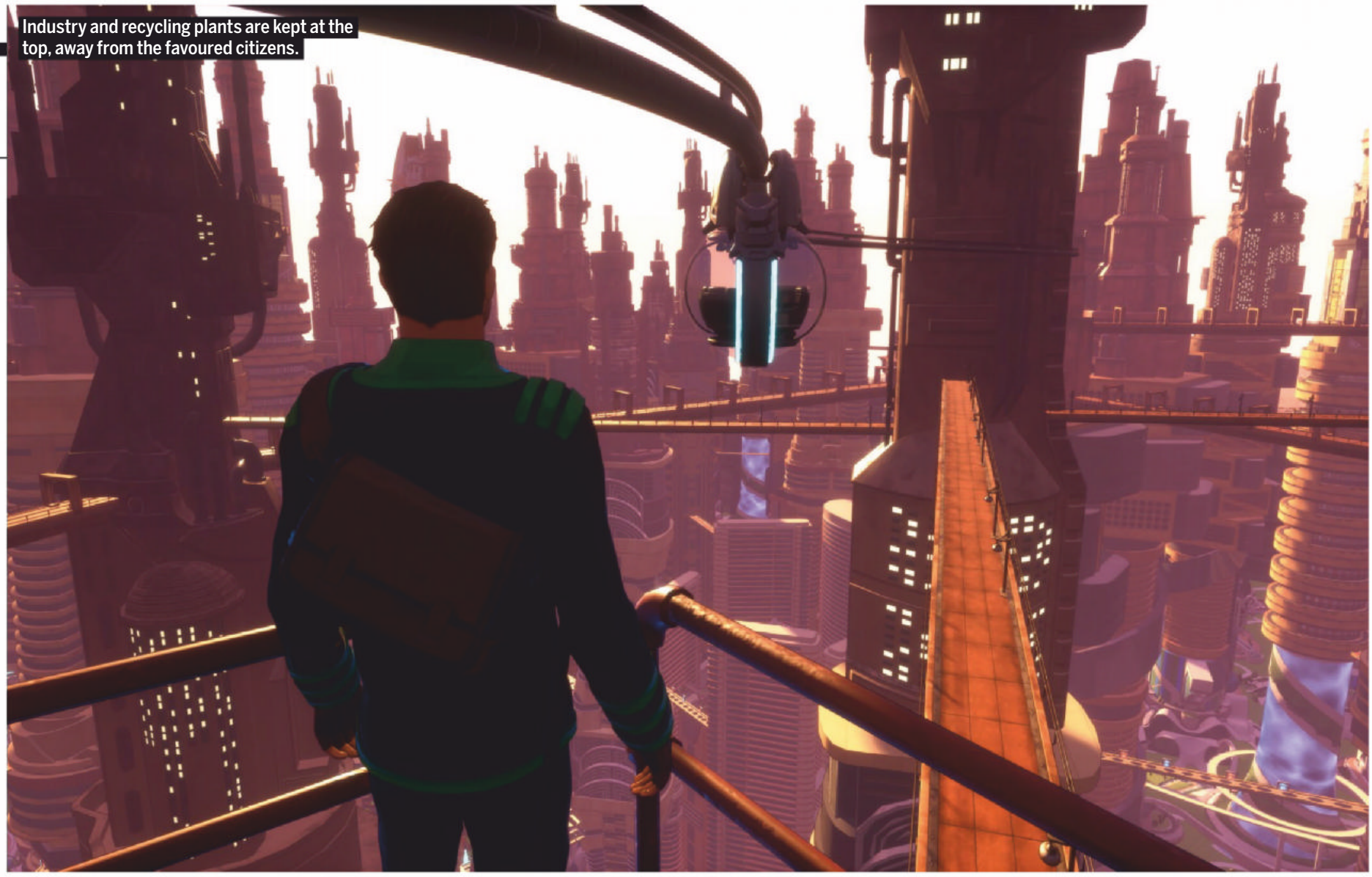


PORTAL 2
A chatty companion and logical puzzles to solve.

PC GAMER VERDICT

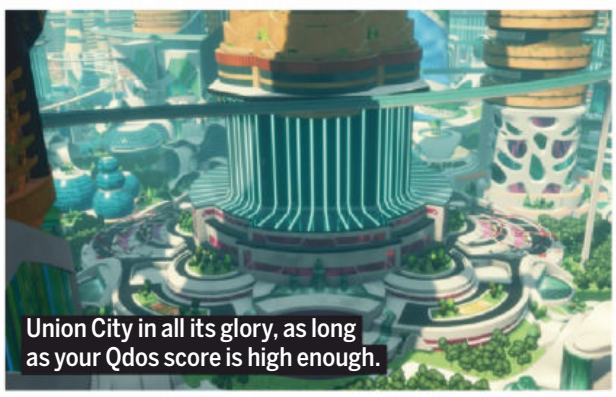
Filled with what made the original game great, this second trip to Union City has been worth the 26-year hiatus.

81


Industry and recycling plants are kept at the top, away from the favoured citizens.

Gang-gang birds are intelligent and dangerous, a combination of traits rare in Union City.
Window

Talk this girl down off the ledge and she'll remember you fondly. Or will she?


Union City in all its glory, as long as your Qdos score is high enough.

YOUR MINISTER OF COMFORT IS ALWAYS LOOKING OUT FOR YOU
Is everyone feeling Aspirational today?

MUSE
TICKETS
Barrel Transporter Robot
We've seen this robot somewhere before.

SMOOTH OPERATOR

Creating a team in F1 2020 brings together a decade of evolution. *By Justin Towell*

Being an F1 driver must mean a lot of weight to carry on your shoulders. When thousands of hours have been poured into crafting your race car, imagine having to face your boss after shoving it in the wall on lap one. Well... what if you are the boss? *F1 2020* lets you be driver and manager of your own team, so you can ignore your own inadequacy and instead punish disgruntled aerodynamic staff by closing their R&D department.

The *F1* series has offered comparable depth in its career mode for a few years now, but creating and managing your own team really does make a difference to the emotional attachment you'll feel. From press interview answers and sponsor choice to how you fill the new calendar with off-track events, everything fits together with existing systems to create a cohesive whole. But most brilliantly, everything eventually comes back to how you drive the car, which is of course paramount in what is still very much an action-packed racing game.

Of course, it's 'action' in the modern *F1* sense of the word, and while there are moments of genuine edge-of-your-bucket-seat excitement as your rival exits the pits right beside you into Turn 1, there are also countless regulations to follow and necessary management of components' lifespan that sap some of the excitement, unless you understand the tactical possibilities, in which case it's a more cerebral experience than any other racing game you could mention.

There are moments of genuine edge-of-your-bucket-seat excitement

While the more authentic session options and car setup details are likely to be overwhelming and too restrictive for newcomers, the new 'Casual' driving option and ability to turn down all of the deeper elements mean you don't need to be a fan to enjoy the superb driving. And anyone can enjoy the TV-style presentation, impressive dynamic weather system, and incredibly detailed slow-motion replays.

The driving engine certainly isn't the most realistic by any means, and the movement of the cars in the replay scenes still doesn't look exactly like real footage, but it plays beautifully all the same.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The official game of the Formula 1 2020 World Championship, with F2 too

EXPECT TO PAY
£45

DEVELOPER
Codemasters

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Windows 10 64-bit Home, Intel Core i7 10th Gen, 16GB RAM, NVidia GeForce RTX 2070.

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
codemasters.com/game/f1-2020

CONTINENTAL CIRCUS

Online multiplayer is fun when you can get into a game – joining is problematic at time of writing – and while the matches are lag-free, even when spectating, the servers are a little flaky. Even so, thanks to more stringent corner cutting rules on multiplayer this time round, the racing feels fairer than ever.

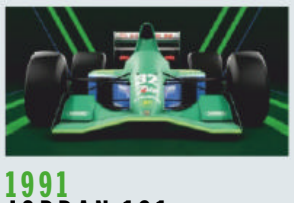
While the racing has all the depth of last year's game, the new 'Overtake Button' simplifies the ERS system to essentially give you a turbo button that needs to be recharged, giving the close racing a fun, tactical twist. The now-ubiquitous rewind option is still there if you make a mistake but, as always, relying on it too much makes the game far less rewarding.

Sadly the special editions do let the team down, clattering into each other on the first lap and causing both to retire like certain red cars we could mention. These are the *Seventy Edition* which adds some car liveries, podium celebrations, and driver customisation options, and the *Schumacher Edition* which celebrates the career of Micheal Schumacher. The latter feels like even more of a missed opportunity than last year's Senna and Prost content, as no classic duels are recreated, instead giving you Schumacher's 3D likeness, four classic cars, helmets, liveries, and a podium celebration. Take a look at the cars in the boxout and decide whether you really need them.

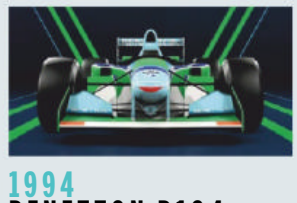
Nonetheless, *F1 2020* is a brilliant, great-looking F1 sim, and just keeps getting deeper the more you look into it. It's very familiar, certainly, and still lacks the quality of car damage it had ten years ago. It could also use a little more flair in its presentation. But the overall package is magnificent. It's simply a superb racing experience. ■

MOST. WINS. EVER.

This year's special edition of *F1 2020* is the *Schumacher Edition*, which can be bought as DLC for the base game. It contains a new podium celebration animation, some Schumacher-inspired liveries and helmet designs, plus Michael's 3D likeness. But you also get these four iconic cars to thrash around the modern circuits.



1991
JORDAN 191
Michael's first F1 ride, which broke down after the first corner in his debut race at Spa. A bit more reliable in-game.



1994
BENETTON B194
The car in which Schumacher won his first championship, after the tragic death of Ayrton Senna at Imola that year.

1995
BENETTON B195
Another classic, this car took Michael to a successful defence of his F1 title, beating second-place Damon Hill.

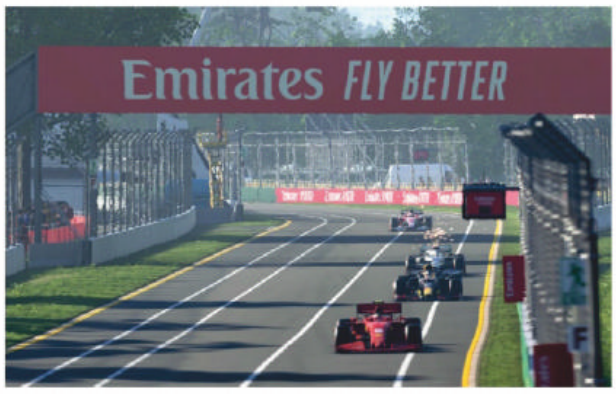
2000
FERRARI F1-2000
This car took Ferrari to its first World Driver's Championship win in 21 years and began an era of supremacy for the team.

PC GAMER VERDICT

The deep career mode is even better when managing your own team, but the tactical racing shines brightest.

88

Zandvoort's banking is surprisingly pronounced and great fun to drive.



Vandvoort here is one of two enjoyable new tracks.

AWAY WITH THE FAERIES

FAE TACTICS revives and simplifies the tactics JRPG. ***By Philip Palmer***

Taking away some of the complexities seen in other JRPGS, *Fae Tactics* is a stripped down and faster experience than classics like *Final Fantasy Tactics*. From the outset, the game lays out building blocks that most strategy players are familiar with: elemental rock-paper-scissors, creature collecting, and combo attacks. *Fae Tactics* lets you get comfortable in a routine for a few battles, then upsets that routine with novel threats.

Some of these challenges were painful the first time I encountered them as heroine Peony, resulting in difficult battles if I didn't adapt my party composition or tactics. Other times, I found ways to turn enemies' traps against them. Once I encountered a gremlin operating a cannon covering the bridge over a pond, with another enemy blocking the far side. After my first two attempts got me blasted by cannon fire, I tried swapping out my summoned units for a pair of flying ones, who merrily flew across the water and then cleared out the roadblock.

Fae Tactics' relative simplicity does mean a bit of sacrifice. At times I missed having in-depth customisation for my characters. Summon units (creatures, basically) and leader units have simple standardised abilities on attack, assist, and wait, and there are no classes to advance in. Summons use preset abilities and leaders can only advance on three passive paths. With the only customisation being passives and my choice of unlocked weapons and one other equipment slot, I often wished I could take my favourite leader and tweak them with more options. Not being able to save during strings of battles was a serious problem at several points, forcing me to repeat fights if I didn't want to leave the game running for long periods of time.

This less-is-more approach does fit well with the flow of combat

But this less-is-more approach does fit well with the flow of combat. With most abilities being passive effects (regenerating HP per round, walking on water), I quickly learned the grammar of the grid. This left me free to make active decisions – should my unit attack to trigger a combo, assist to set up my next move, or wait? Battles themselves still take between 20 and 40 minutes, but you won't spend so much of it selecting and confirming things, as *Fae Tactics* omits the pages of menus seen in other turn-based RPGs.

LORDS AND LADIES

My most rewarding moments were battles where I brought just the right composition of units – you pick three powerful leaders, three simpler summons, and three spells to bring into combat before each fight. After surveying the battlefield and selecting, I could position my melee units to set off combos that would land multiple back attacks and crits in a rapid-fire blitz of damage. I like how this feels, like I'm in command of my ultimate strategy, but it wasn't effortless – I'd often have to respond to unexpected reinforcements.

As a JRPG story, I liked the way the game scribbles a silly face on its post-apocalypse faerie world. Peony searches for her mother amid an ancient war between humans and fae, but I actually found that the smaller stories – like a boxing chicken trying to beat a corrupt mafioso – were the most entertaining to me. Some of these stories and sidequests had small arcs that would reward me with a new leader or some new equipment. Peony's search to discover what happened to her mother isn't all that gripping, really, but her band of misfits are pretty endearing. Her starting companion Chico, a lovable dog, quickly became my favourite for how good he was at protecting the rest of my squad.

While the story occupies a lot less of the game than the combat, I found it impossible not to love some of the weird menagerie of animals I was collecting in *Fae Tactics*. Part of me wants to slide their character portraits into a card binder like I did with my favourite Pokemon when I was just a wee lad. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A charming, turn-based strategy RPG

EXPECT TO PAY
£15.50

DEVELOPER
Endlessfluff Games

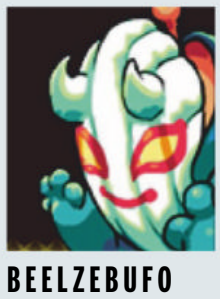
PUBLISHER
Humble Games

REVIEWED ON
Windows 10, Intel Core i5-9600K, 32GB of DDR4 3200MHz, AMD Radeon R9 380, Samsung SSD 850 EVO 1TB, Steam Controller

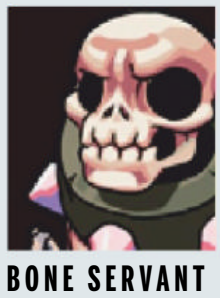
MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
humblegames.com/games/faetactics

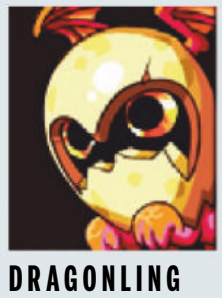
MAGICAL MENAGERIE *A few of the unusual friends you can find*



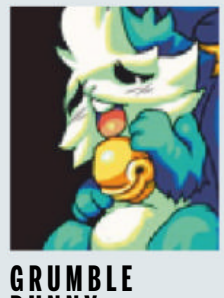
BEELZEBUFO
This clam-demon and part-time medic is a lifetime jump scare enthusiast.



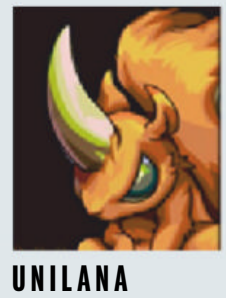
BONE SERVANT
We'll never know what makes this shield-wielding magic Skeletor so angry.



DRAGONLING
This fiery little guy is doomed to endure a lifetime of eggs over easy jokes. Ha!



GRUMBLE BUNNY
An aquatic rabbit with a healing touch and devoted bell enthusiast.



UNILANA
Fae laboratories turned out this squirrel-unicorn hybrid to throw dirt at your enemies.

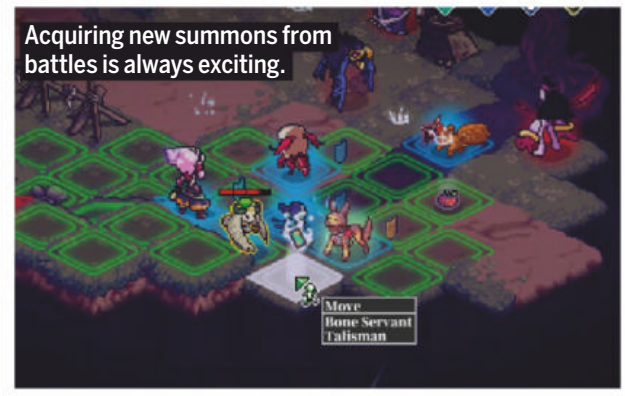
PC GAMER VERDICT

Fae Tactics takes an enjoyable swing at boiling down a complex genre, but ends up feeling a bit lightweight as a result.

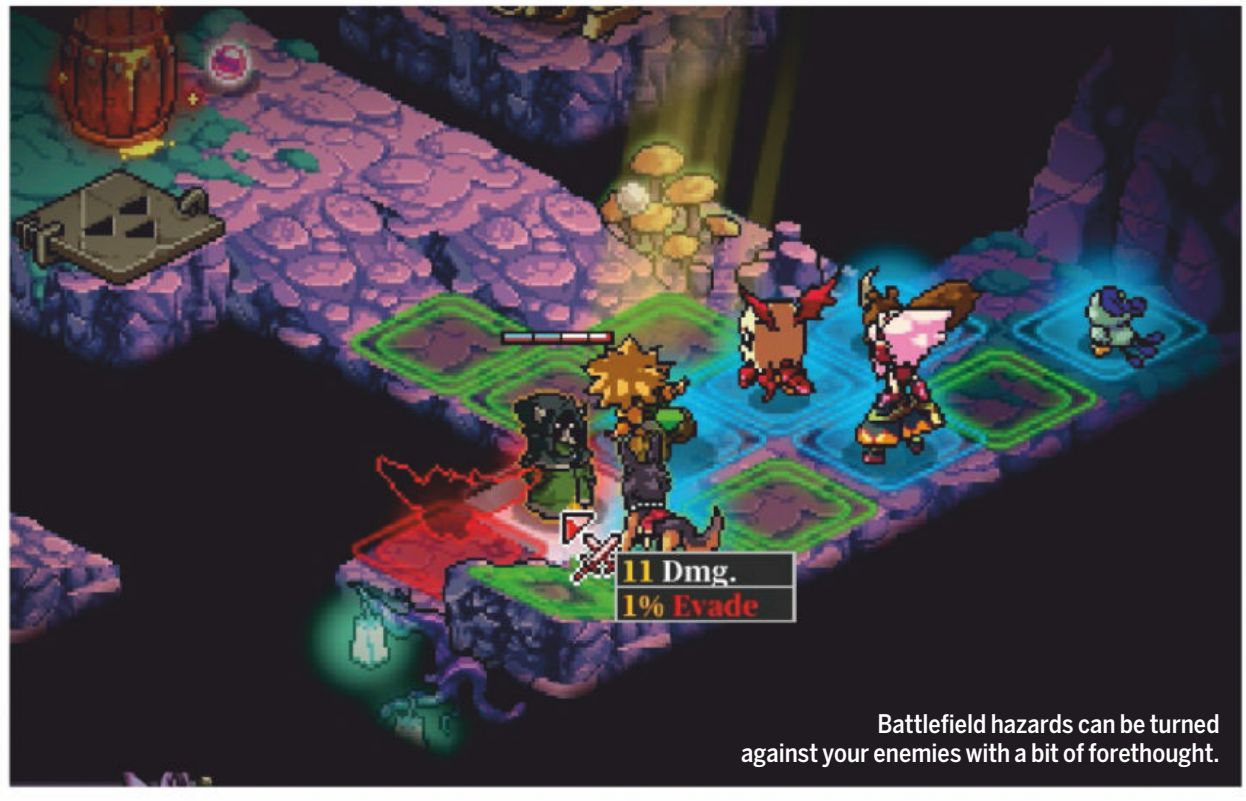
77

Back attacks are guaranteed damage, so be careful with unit facing.

Browsing your menagerie is satisfying, there are even elemental variants of some summons.



Acquiring new summons from battles is always exciting.



Battlefield hazards can be turned against your enemies with a bit of forethought.

CARD GAME

PAPER BEAST is two halves of a fantastic VR experience. ***By Rick Lane***

Part puzzle game, part god game, all extremely weird, *Paper Beast* is unlike anything I've played before. A dedicated virtual reality experience, it puts you at the centre of a unique wildlife simulation where the animals are not flesh and fur, but paper origami creatures roaming a harsh desert world. It's a fascinating and surprisingly emotional experience, albeit one that only scratches the surface of its potential.

Paper Beast is broken up into two distinct halves, starting with its story mode. The precise nature of that story is open to interpretation, but your fundamental role in the game is that of a fickle god, acting varyingly as a helping hand and an agent of chaos to the animals roaming its world. The game's eight chapters are divided into several individual scenes, each of which comprises a small puzzle about moving the game's critters from A to B.

Each beast has its own set of behaviours you'll need to learn to solve the game's puzzles. With the horse-like papyvoruses (papyvori?), for example, you can pick up their favourite snack (which is crumpled paper – some sort of weird cannibalism?) and use it to lure them to different locations. You might do this to help them avoid predators, or to guide them through a network of caverns where their fragile bodies are protected from the wind. Puzzles often combine these behaviours with the added ability to manipulate the terrain around you. You can pick up the sand-balls formed by the crab creatures and toss them onto the ground, creating sand pathways other animals can use to navigate across water or up slippery slopes.

Each beast has its own set of behaviours you'll need to learn

What results is a sequence of dynamic environmental conundrums. Although the solution is always fixed, the way you can manipulate both the animals and the terrain is not. You're constantly pushing and pulling the world around you to suit your needs. That said, working with AI animals does have its downsides. They'll often require some encouragement to get them to the right spot, while *Paper Beast*'s controls are unusually imprecise for a VR game, meaning your solutions are rarely perfect.

The game's narrative is as strange as it reticent. During your time with *Paper Beast*, you'll encounter a spectacular animal parade, float a giant radio over a glacial crevasse, and ride a hot-air-balloon that grows out of a tree, none of which has any explicit reason or context. Yet while the game is reluctant to spell out its actual message, the mood of each scene is always clear. It's a chill experience throughout, but its tone ranges from celebration to tragedy. Watching the papyvorus struggle against the game's powerful winds, only to inevitably fold and be tossed into the air like sad animal kites, is undeniably moving.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
VR puzzle game about guiding paper animals through a hostile wilderness

EXPECT TO PAY
£15.50

DEVELOPER
Pixel Reef

PUBLISHER
Pixel Reef/Plug in Digital

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 3600, Nvidia RTX 2080 Super, 16 GB RAM, Oculus Quest with link-compatible cable.

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
pixelreef.fr/paper-beast

WALKING PAPERS

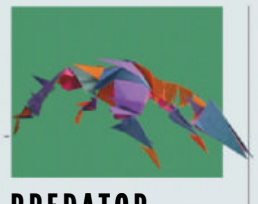
There's plenty to enjoy about *Paper Beast*'s story mode, but I always felt constrained by the limits of its vignettes. Fortunately, the game also comes packaged with a literal sandbox mode that lets you transform a desert wilderness into a virtual wildlife preserve. You can fill lake beds and dried-up rivers with water, place plants and animals, and even conjure rainstorms. Particularly striking is the zoom system. Pushing the touch controllers toward one another lets you grow to god-like size, able oversee the entire map and sculpt it like a landscape gardener.

The sandbox mode does demonstrate how deep *Paper Beast*'s simulation actually runs. Plants propagate naturally, while animals exist in a clear food-chain with prey, predators and apex predators all intermingling. It's fantastic to watch in motion, but it's also somewhat pointless, resembling a prototype for a fantastic god-game that for some reason didn't quite work out, and so was made into an optional mode.

This is my main issue with *Paper Beast* – it feels like two halves of a game that should be one cohesive whole. Both sides certainly work well in their limited contexts, but they each feel more like a tantalising taste of a grander experience that ultimately never transpires. ■

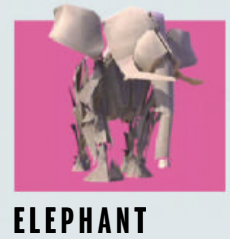
BESTIARY *Judging* Paper Beast*'s best creatures*

PAPYVORU
The iconic *Paper Beast* beast. Cute and friendly, but flimsy. 6/10



PREDATOR
Does what it says on the tin. Colourful, but also a dick. 5/10

BRIDGER
Bizarre turtle thing that excretes sand when stimulated. 7/10



ELEPHANT
The only 'normal' animal in *Paper Beast*. A sight to behold in VR. 8/10

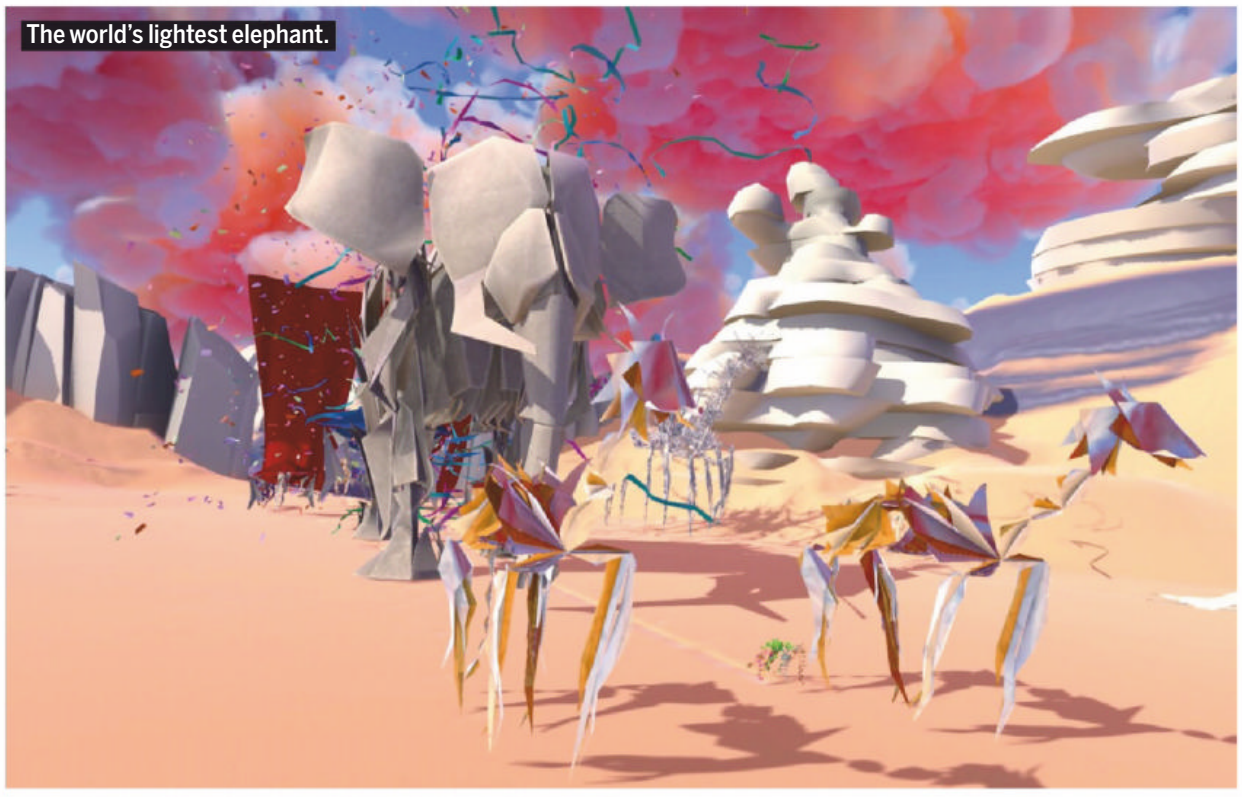
CAGE
Sort of a cross between a giraffe and a spider. Quite odd. 10/10

PC GAMER VERDICT

A charming and surprisingly emotional VR experience, but it ultimately fails to live up to its potential.

70

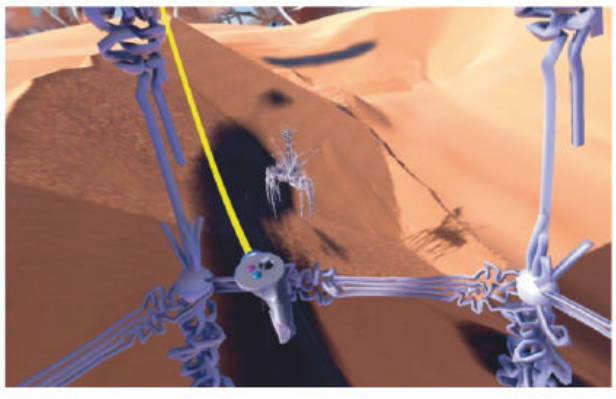
Paper Beast is a striking game, although it lacks the same VR fidelity of, say, *Half-Life Alyx*.



The world's lightest elephant.

Balloons grow on trees, because why not?

This friendly dude is a sort-of cassette-tape monster.



The sandbox is heavily simulated. Plants propagate naturally and predators hunt herbivores.

MEAT IS MURDER

CARRION is more of a buffet line than a hunting trip. ***By Imran Khan***

There's no overwrought origin story to *Carrion*'s horror. There's a monster. The monster eats those people. The monster does not like getting shot by the people so it should probably eat people before they shoot it. You're the monster, and this is *Carrion*'s tutorial sequence, which introduces smooth controls that propel the creature through a dank underground laboratory. As I direct it, it attaches its tentacles to surfaces with no interference or complication, evoking a feeling of flight.

It's with that same streamlined gusto that *Carrion* pursues all its mechanics. The game is a metroidvania in concept, but the espresso shot version of one, without offering much of the way in actual exploration. You move the monster throughout the base, seeking simply to get outside, growing larger by absorbing biomass (eating people) and then distributing that biomass into holes in the wall to spread through the laboratory. Doing so opens up new paths and crucial progress doors that lead to new areas, and is also surprisingly gross. There are a lot of gooey tentacles here.

It is very rare not to know exactly where to go next for progress, though the times I did get lost were aggravating due to the lack of any sort of map. The labyrinthian maze of one-way drain pipes makes these instances more annoying than they need to be and, for a game so heavily dependent on backtracking, its five-hour runtime feels short.

BLOOD SIMPLE

The puzzles themselves are solved quickly and do not require much in execution, but can sometimes be a little frustrating. In one situation, I killed a piece I needed to solve the puzzle and had to restart at a previous checkpoint. In another, I am positive I solved it using an unintended method and spent minutes in fear that I had broken progression and would have to restart. Perhaps most annoyingly, the checkpoints only exist in certain rooms, and a far-off combat encounter forced me to execute puzzles I had solved again and again to get back to where I died.

Utterly disgusting to look at in mostly intended ways

Humans are the only enemies, and they either run from the monster or try to fight back, the latter behaviour providing most of the conflict in the game. After its wild beginnings, which are all about fast movement and carnage, *Carrion* transforms into a reverse-survival horror scenario. The monster can scare enemies by growling, knocking out vents to distract them, then grabbing for them with tentacles when they aren't looking. These combat scenarios get harder as time goes on, but *Carrion* stops short of ever making them frustrating for a patient player.

While the monster does gain powers over time, few truly change things up in terms of traversal and are more often essentially just keys to subvert different types of doors and obstacles. The ability to take over human hosts is an interesting idea, but is used in surprisingly few non-elective situations. As the monster's mass grows and it achieves the shape and form of a giant flesh tube, it becomes somewhat unwieldy to control. I stopped being able to consistently discern which end was going to move forward or backward in contrast to the smaller forms' quicker and more lithe movement.

Carrion is utterly disgusting to look at in mostly intended ways that manage to be captivating. Watching the monster, a mass of flesh, eyes, and mouths, twist around corners and slip through small openings is nearly enough to make me retch, but it's utterly entrancing. Rooms quickly become covered in blood and viscera, which is a neat effect, but sometimes obscured the pipe I was looking for.

While I might disagree with the notion that *Carrion* is a truly great metroidvania, a genre that has lots of older and modern classics, it is at very least a refreshing take on it. It controls like a dream with an analog stick, and there's a fluidity to the monster's movements that I feel like I will be searching for in other games for years. It just falls short of greatness, settling into its comfort zone as a series of interconnected puzzles, and then failing to surprise much after that. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
2D metroidvania action with some horror elements

EXPECT TO PAY
£17

DEVELOPER
Phobia Game Studio

PUBLISHER
Devolver Digital

REVIEWED ON
Windows 10, AMD Ryzen 7 1700, 16GB RAM, Radeon RX480

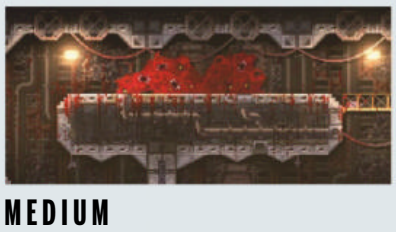
MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
devolverdigital.com/games/carrion

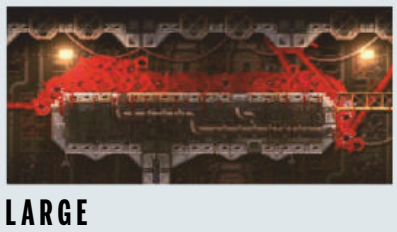
MASS EFFECT

The ups and downs of the monster's changing size

SMALL
Shoots webs, moves fast, not suited for combat.



MEDIUM
Rams through obstacles, decent health, good middle-ground.

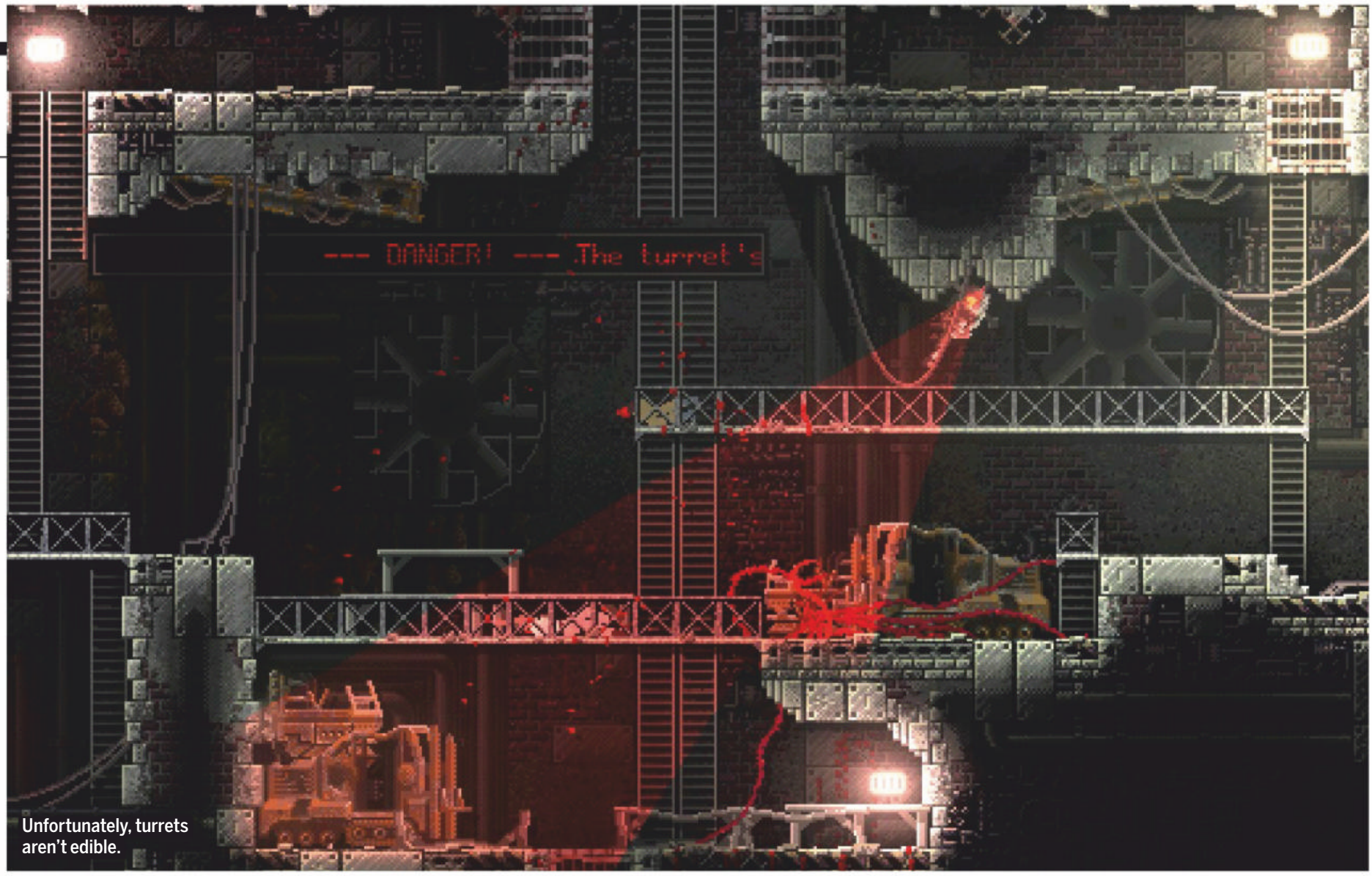


LARGE
More difficult to control, but can take damage for days.

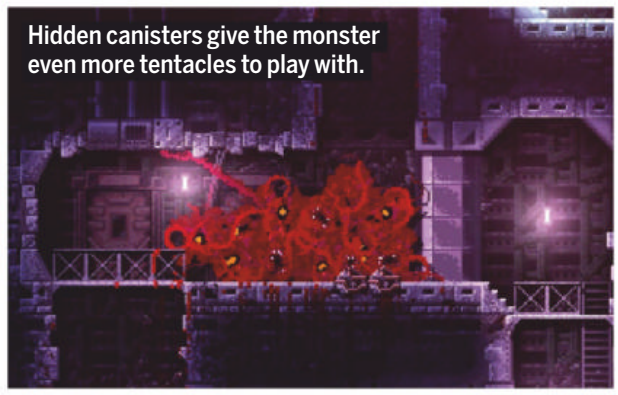
PC GAMER VERDICT

***Carrion* is a fun reverse-horror adventure, though it doesn't push the concept to the heights of its potential.**

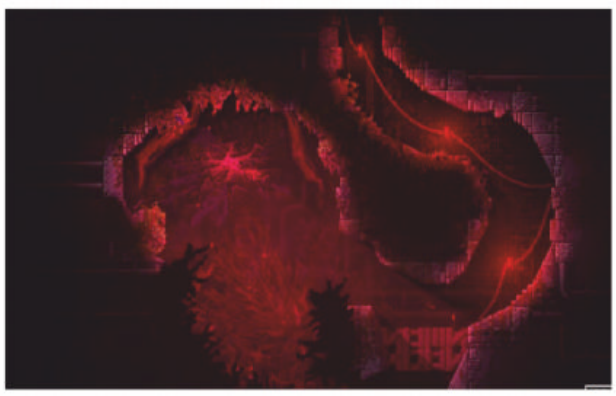
72

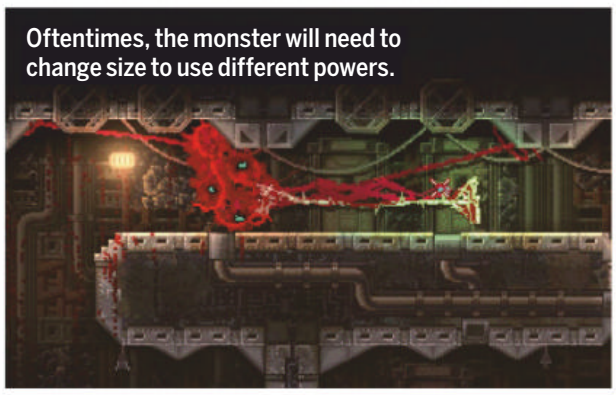


Unfortunately, turrets aren't edible.

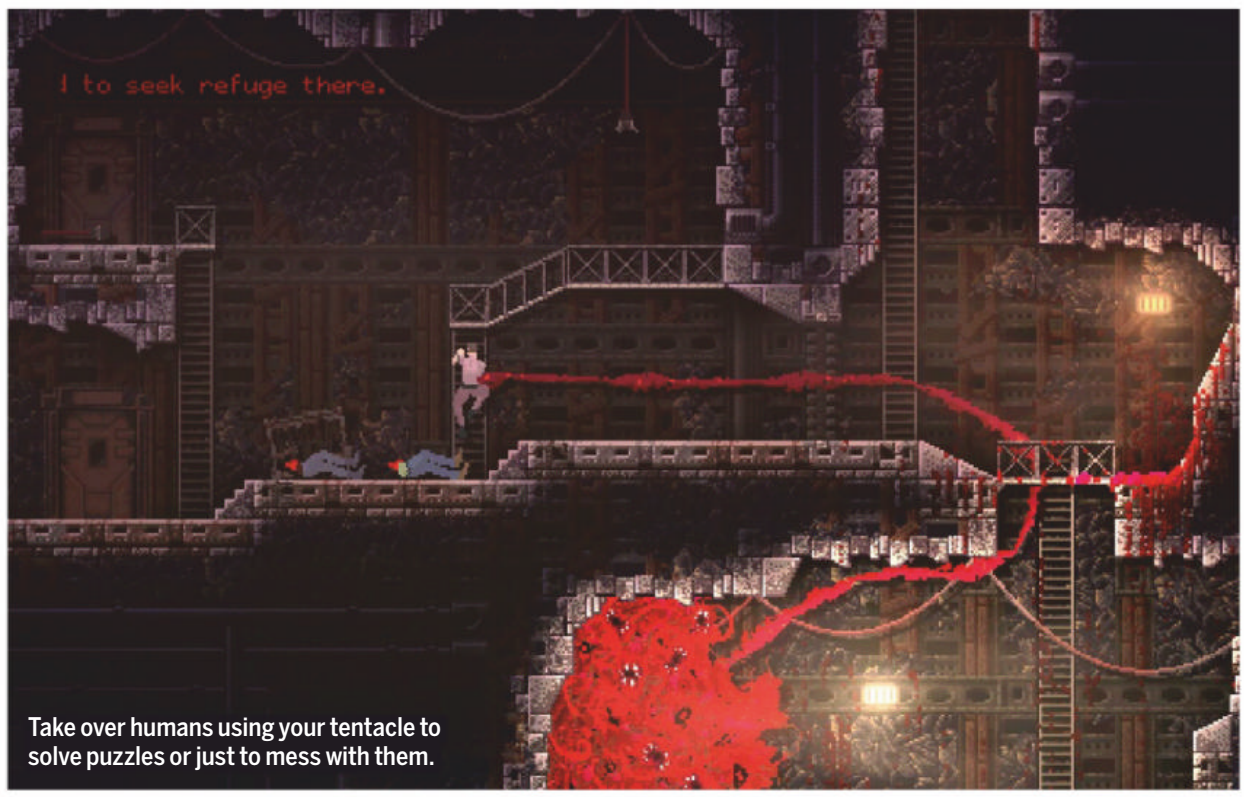


Hidden canisters give the monster even more tentacles to play with.





Oftentimes, the monster will need to change size to use different powers.



Take over humans using your tentacle to solve puzzles or just to mess with them.

MEGA BLAST

ROCKET ARENA is an exciting evolution of a classic shooter mode. ***By Morgan Park***

I wish it wasn't so hard to find a mellow multiplayer shooter. All of my current favourites are these competitive tactical skirmishes that tense up my entire body. I want more of the opposite – a laid-back shooter that goes down so smooth that eight matches can fly by before I know it. That's not what I thought I was getting into with *Rocket Arena*, a shooter that presents itself like yet another contender in an increasingly crowded pile of hero-based service games.

Rocket Arena gets its name from the classic *Quake* mod of the same name that pit players 1v1 with nothing but rocket launchers. *Rocket Arena* takes that concept and blows it up into a hero shooter built on the foundation of rockets. Final Strike has essentially deconstructed the rocket launcher and crafted a tasting menu of its various interpretations. Kayi's crossbow? Sharp rockets with a long windup. Mysteen's throwing cards? Magic bundles of burst-fire rockets. Boone's blunderbuss? Sniper rockets!

Jumping into a game all about rockets got me thinking about the iconic weapon in general. When I reflected on rockets-only custom games in *Halo 3* (*Quake* is as old as me, so it's not a personal touchstone) or *TF2*'s soldier, I realised the explosive payload is secondary to the fun of mastering a slow-firing projectile. Leading targets and nailing a direct hit flexes a completely different muscle than twitchy hitscan weapons in *Valorant* or *Rainbow Six Siege*. For *Rocket Arena*, a kid-friendly game that looks like a Dreamworks movie, trading blows feels more like a long-range game of tag.

Final Strike has essentially deconstructed the rocket launcher

BLAST ZONE

Triple jumps and movement abilities make nailing that perfect led shot or direct hit a lot more challenging than in my *Halo* days. Instead of one-shot showdowns, *Rocket Arena*'s weapons and abilities are tools to knock each out of bounds. It's basically *Super Smash Bros*' knockout mechanic in a full 3D space, and it's a perfect fit for the lighthearted fun that Final Strike Games is going for.

For an entirely non-lethal explosion fest, *Rocket Arena*'s combat feels really good. There's a lot of great visual and audio feedback that sells its concussive rocket blasts without the need of blood squibs or meat chunks. Repeated hits on enemies play rising musical notes that builds the tension of a close fight. When you finally build their damage meter enough to score a megablast, you hear the intoxicating crack of a bat on a baseball as they soar out of the map like a proper home run. Combat is (slightly) deepened by unique secondary attacks, movement abilities, item pickups, and simple upgrades equipped out of game. The random item pickups strike a nice balance of small assists that don't hand you a fight, like a small speed boost or throwable bomb.

I dig how each of the ten launch characters distinguish themselves in action, but on the whole, *Rocket Arena* looks forgettable. It has a generic cutesy fantasy-tech aesthetic that's starting to blend together into a lot of similar recent hero games. As I was playing hoverboard-riding and minigun-toting Rev, I could've sworn I fell back into *Bleeding Edge*.

It used to be a lot harder to recommend *Rocket Arena* at its launch price of £25, but EA appears to be walking that back. You can currently pick up the standard edition on Origin for £4, but Steam is still listing the old price. The niche appeal of *Rocket Arena* will limit its player base, so it's good that EA is making the game more accessible.

The new price has helped *Rocket Arena* become the low-stakes shooter that it should've been at launch, but I'm worried that it could be too late. Longer queue times are already affecting my desire to play. It'd be great to see the game thrive under the lower price, and I also have hope that a smaller dedicated community can keep it alive. For now, I'm eager to see new heroes, maps, and modes, because *Rocket Arena* is a game that deserves to stick around. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A hero shooter based entirely on rocket launchers

EXPECT TO PAY
£25

DEVELOPER
Final Strike Games

PUBLISHER
EA

REVIEWED ON
RTX 2060, Ryzen 5 2600 3.4Ghz, 16 GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
3v3 arena shooting

LINK
ea.com/en-gb/games/rocket-arena

BOOM PATROL *A brief history of rocket launchers*

1996 QUAKE
The *Rocket Arena* mod in *Quake* was the first time that launchers were used to their limits.

2001 HALO: COMBAT EVOLVED
Halo's custom game settings were a great way to experience rocket-only fun.

2007 TEAM FORTRESS 2
The soldier in *Team Fortress 2* is iconic to multiplayer rocket launching.

2016 OVERWATCH
Pharah is a homage to the original *Rocket Arena* mod, and a direct descendant of *TF2*'s soldier.

2020 ROCKET ARENA
Rocket Arena feels like a love letter to the rocket launcher and its history in competitive FPS.

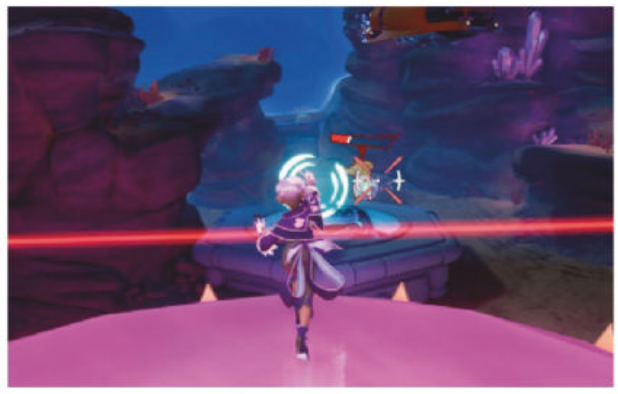
PC GAMER VERDICT

***Rocket Arena* is the best kind of mindless fun (with rockets!). And now you can easily get into it at a lower price point.**

78

If your blast meter is full, it's best to stay low.

In Treasure Hunt, teams gain points by holding the treasure chest longer.



Topnotch's grenade launcher has *Halo Reach*'s delayed detonation feature.

The chaos of Rocketball makes it hard to track what's going on.

Every mode in *Rocket Arena* maxes out at 3v3.

UDDER DISAPPOINTMENT

Not all farms are born equal in STORY OF SEASONS: FRIENDS OF MINERAL TOWN. *By Daniella Lucas*

After getting a veggie patch of my own in real life I've finally figured out why every farming game begins with mastering turnips – it's because they really are quick and easy to grow. And while you'll never be able to make a living off of them like you can in *Story Of Seasons: Friends Of Mineral Town*, at least the real ones have some flavour.

Things kick off with a letter from a distant mayor and before you know it you've taken over your dead grandfather's dilapidated farm and are desperately trying to scrounge for berries in the wild to afford your all important turnip seeds. There's a town filled with people to woo, events to attend, and even a mine to explore. Sound familiar? This is the inspiration for the agricultural colossus that is *Stardew Valley*.

Time for a confusing history lesson. *Story of Seasons: Friends of Mineral Town* is a remake of the 2003 Gameboy Advance classic *Harvest Moon: Friends of Mineral Town* (the *Harvest Moon* name belongs to the old publisher Natsume, hence the change to *Story Of Seasons* here even though it's the same game) which is itself a remake of *Harvest Moon: Back to Nature* on PS1 from 1999.

Mineral Town itself is a pretty place to live – everything has cute, round edges and the only danger you'll ever face is a late bedtime. There's a lovely little library, a scenic mountain path and a beach to relax on. It's all very idyllic, but small since it's based on the map of a 21-year-old game. If you played the original you'll love finding everything exactly as you remember it, but if you're looking for a farming fix after life in *Stardew Valley* you'll be left wondering what all of the fuss is about.

All of the inhabitants have their own lives and routines, but they're all shallow ones based on tropes. The girl with glasses is shy and works at the library, the artist is brooding and 'mysterious', your childhood friend is... also there. Several are romanceable, but I resented handing over my precious turnips to befriend most of them as they're all so boring. I started wooing the doctor as he seemed like the only serious adult in the village – a man dedicated to the pursuit of science and medicine. But after giving him enough of a taste of my cucumbers he gave me a 'negative ions' diffuser which will apparently boost my health and help me relax? He might as well have told me to use jade eggs and go on a juice cleanse with the amount of sense he was making. Instant turn off.

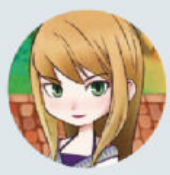
The relaxation found in this routine is the one thing that still holds up

SOW IN LOVE

The best potential love interests to plough with

BRANDON
The brooding artist and a new dating option. It's easy to buy his love with lumber.

KAI
Only around for the summer, but at least he has a life outside of Mineral Town.



KAREN
Her name wasn't a meme originally, but she's a lovely girl to go and have a drink with.

RAN
A good choice as she's easy going and sweet natured, plus she's a great cook.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A remake of a now tired farming sim

EXPECT TO PAY
£43

DEVELOPER
Marvelous Inc

PUBLISHER
Xseed Games, Marvelous USA

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700, CPU @ 3.60 GHz, 16GB Ram

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/2ZEsOo1

FARM FRESH

Despite all of that the act of farming is still great fun. The cycle of tilling the earth, planting and nurturing your vegetables every morning is a compelling one. Despite not taking to the town I still found myself in that comforting loop of 'just one more in-game day' spent brushing my cows and feeding my chickens. Progress is slow and hard-earned as the stamina bar depletes surprisingly quickly, but every tool upgrade helps you open up just a little bit more of your plot. The relaxation found in this routine is the one thing that still holds up.

There are a few modernisations – you can save anywhere you like rather than just at the journal by your bed, you have the ability to change outfits, and there's an easy mode that gives you a gold boost to shipping items – but mostly this is a completely faithful recreation. However some of the modernisations don't go far enough. You now have some creative control over your character, but with only four avatar options (two men and two women), and three skin colour options (pale, paler, ambiguously tan) it feels out of touch. Why not go further and have an actual character creator? Being able to better make a farmer in your own image won't take anything from the original experience.

It's been 17 years since the Gameboy Advance version and while it's great that they're trying to recapture that nostalgia that made people fall in love with the genre in the first place, things have moved on. It makes for an interesting history lesson if you want to see what inspired *Stardew Valley* and how far things have progressed since then, but perhaps it's time to put *Mineral Town* out to pasture. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

***Mineral Town* is a faithful recreation, but why go back when *Stardew Valley* has since perfected the genre?**

68

These are the only character options you get.

Events are cute, but the townsfolk don't seem that excited about them.

The hot spring will replenish your stamina.

Round bois.

BIG NOUN ENERGY

OTHERCIDE is bleak and hopeless, but that's the point. ***By Tom Hatfield***

"You will fight, you will fail, you will rise again." This is *Othercide*'s motto, and it deserves credit for sticking to the bit. It doesn't just *say* it's about a hopeless war against encroaching darkness, it commits to the theme. *Othercide* mixes turn-based tactical combat with the repetition and incremental progress of roguelikes. It takes the threat of losing your best soldier from *XCOM* and makes that threat a certainty. You will lose, and then you will try again. And again.

You are The Mother, some sort of eldritch being fighting against Suffering, with a capital 'S', to protect The Child, using resurrected soldiers called The Daughters. Other extremely capitalised nouns also feature heavily. It's not a style of writing I'm usually a fan of, but big and abstract suits *Othercide* very well, it doesn't really need to define its terms. What matters is atmosphere, and this game is dripping with it.

That doom and gloom feeling isn't just confined to the striking black and white visuals however. *Othercide* really goes all in – every system in the game is leveraged towards this sense of hopelessness. Take healing, for example: there isn't any. The only way for one of your Daughters to recover health is to sacrifice a Daughter of equal or higher level. This means that any slip up, any damage taken, will result in the loss of a star performer.

How does the game get away with being this lethal? Because, as I said earlier, it's also a roguelike. Each run (or 'Recollection') of *Othercide* consists of a series of turn-based battles against waves of monsters, leading up to a climactic boss fight. Lose that boss fight, run out of troops, or just decide you've had enough, and you'll have to start the loop again, but this time with a series of powerful boosts or 'Rembrances' that can improve the whole team.

'CIDE ORDER

The idea then, is to use these boosts to cut down on repetition, but it only partially works. After the first run I understood the game well enough that the build up missions became easy, but that first boss still seemed an impassable wall. If I'm honest there was a big chunk of my playthrough where I was frustrated. Yet each time I felt like quitting, I learned a new trick that gave me an edge. Eventually I figured out how to use 'Memories', small boosts that slot into individual abilities to improve them, to buff up the damage of my ranged attacks, letting me slowly chip away at that beastly boss's hit points without being hit by their utterly devastating counter-attacks.

Each time I felt like quitting, I learned a new trick that gave me an edge

The combat system itself is a pleasing puzzle, mostly reliant on manipulating the initiative tracker. Both Daughters and monsters have the ability to affect the order of events: some attacks can push an enemy further down the initiative track, while big, powerful abilities often act on a delay, taking several ticks before they fire.

Let's draw an example: one of my Daughters, Douce, has been targeted by an enemy Curse Therapist with a delayed attack called Massive Shot, which will fire at initiative 30. If Douce had a turn before 30 she could simply move out of range, but she doesn't go till 50. So instead I move up Melody, a Blademaster (melee DPS class), who goes at 25. Taking out that enemy ends the threat completely, and Douce is free to take another turn at 50.

I think *Othercide* will split people. It is very easy to come up short against a boss several times and feel like you're doing a lot of busywork for little progress. When I was failing to beat that first boss I had a far lower opinion of it, but when I finally made that breakthrough I got a great sense of accomplishment, as well as Remembrances that let me skip that boss and start my Daughters at a higher level, avoiding the grind.

Whether *Othercide* is for you will depend on whether you have the patience for a roguelike where you can spend a good eight hours feeling like you're making no progress before suddenly breaking through. It surprised me to discover it, but it turns out I do. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A roguelike turn-based tactics game about death and failure

EXPECT TO PAY
£30

DEVELOPER
Lightbulb Crew

PUBLISHER
Focus Home Interactive

REVIEWED ON
Intel i5, 16gb RAM, Nvidia GTX 1660

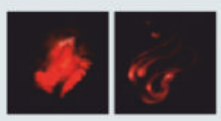
MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
othercidegame.com

REMEMBER ME?

Remembrances are the key to a good run of Othercide, here are some of my favourites

DAMAGED LEFT EYEBALL
You start with this and it costs nothing, but free Memories will help boost some of your starting skills.



RED EMBERS/ SHIMMERING BLOOD
Health is in short supply in *Othercide*, take all the boosts you can get your hands on!

BURNT CONFESSION
Vitae is the currency you use for almost everything in *Othercide* – more is obviously better.

CORRODED SCISSORS
This allows you to resurrect any Daughter, including ones that died in previous games. Very powerful.

HEART OF CLAW/PLAGUE ESSENCE
Damage boosts are obviously good for getting further in *Othercide*, grab these when you can.

BEAKED MASK/ BURIED GEAR
You get these by beating the first boss, and they're what allows you to skip over him in future runs.

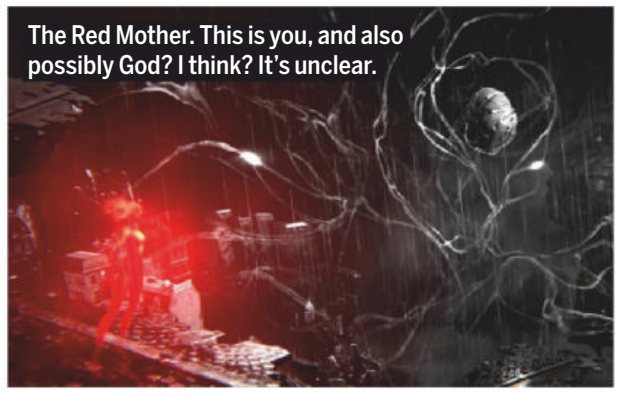
PC GAMER VERDICT

***Othercide* owns its bleak themes completely, but the roguelike nature of it can get a little repetitive after a while.**

76

Imbued Blade does massive damage, but with a built-in delay

You know things are going well when the boss gets a cinematic camera for his attacks



The Red Mother. This is you, and also possibly God? I think? It's unclear.

Always do a cool dash attack. Always.

There are only three classes: shield, comically oversized sword, and gun.

A MUG'S GAME

3D visual novel NECROBARISTA is as Australian as meat pie. *By Jody Macgregor*

I've never played a game set in the city where I live until *Necrobarista*, which takes place in Melbourne, Australia. It's not Australian in obvious ways, but it turns dead outlaw Ned Kelly into a supernatural enforcer in shorts and a Collingwood scarf who menaces a cafe, and expects you to realise that's funny. If a New York show wants me to know bodegas and Tompkins Square Park, a Melbourne game can get away with referencing Collingwood.

Necrobarista is a visual novel about the Terminal cafe, whose customers include ghosts and the living. It's a space between the afterlife and Carlton, where the dead have bodies and a 24-hour-limit before moving on. People overstay that limit, but doing so runs up a debt the Terminal is supposed to pay off. Its owners haven't been, and therein lies the game's conflict.

Unlike a visual novel where 2D characters slide past static backgrounds, *Necrobarista* is 3D. There are brief animations, characters pouring drinks or walking around, but even when there aren't the cinematography is considered. Two characters will be talking, heads close in the wide shot, but then in opposite halves of the screen in close-ups to suggest metaphorical distance. The text sometimes vibrates, swirls, or grows. Everything about the composition is thoughtful.

It's not going to convince anyone who doesn't like visual novels already, though. The story is linear, and it's just a matter of clicking through it. There's an interactive element to *Necrobarista*, though. Between chapters you walk around the Terminal in first-person finding vignettes called Memories. They're optional, giving insights into the staff or customers, and the way you unlock them takes some explaining.

You can click on highlighted words during chapters to see additional text that adds context or explains slang or mysticism. A cloud of those words reappears at the end of the chapter and you're asked to choose seven. Each word connects to a theme, character, or location, sorted after you pick them into categories like 'magic' or 'lore' that can overlap and be tricky to guess. Each story costs three fragments to unlock. You can always press escape to jump over to Memories and see what fragments you need, so I'd find myself staring at a cloud of words thinking, "I need more death and Melbourne."

The tone is as anime as the big-eyed characters suggest

The rest of *Necrobarista* is a story about dealing with grief, lightened with regular jokes about people who order overly complicated coffees. It begins with a newly dead Melbournite named Kishan wandering into the Terminal and being briefed on how things work, our convenient viewpoint character. Meanwhile, necromancer baristas Maddy and Chay struggle to keep their business alive while being distracted by determined debt collector Ned.

While there's a lot of Australian-isms, the tone is as anime as the big-eyed characters suggest. Ashley is a robotics genius with a cybernetic arm who scratch-builds her own Tachikomas, for instance. Also, the writing sometimes slips into the formalism you get from writers who grew up reading Japanese that's been translated into stilted English, with the occasional typo.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A visual novel about ghosts in a cafe where avocado costs four dollars extra

EXPECT TO PAY
£15.50

DEVELOPER
Route 59

PUBLISHER
Coconut Island Games

REVIEWED ON
Windows 10, Intel Core i7, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GTX 1060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
necrobarista.com

LIGHTLY GHOSTED

Occasionally the skeletal remains of another *Necrobarista* peek through. Halfway in, three characters are introduced and immediately vanish, while a character seen in the intro never appears in the game. The ability to walk around scenes listening to people's thoughts, present in a demo, is no longer here. I can't help but wonder what it could have been with a little more interactivity and a larger cast, which would perhaps be possible if only videogame funding was as easy to find in Melbourne as a $3.50 flat white.

What's there remains great, however. It's presented gorgeously, the camera finding interesting angles for every scene, and the story hits all its emotional beats with impressive ease, whether it's dealing with the decision to let someone you care about die, or just making some silly puns. Plus, it made me feel a powerful need for sourdough toast with eggs, grilled tomatoes, and beans. Maybe a muffin to go. No, not the poppy seed one. ■

DOWN UNDER-ISMS

Aus slang you'll encounter in the Terminal

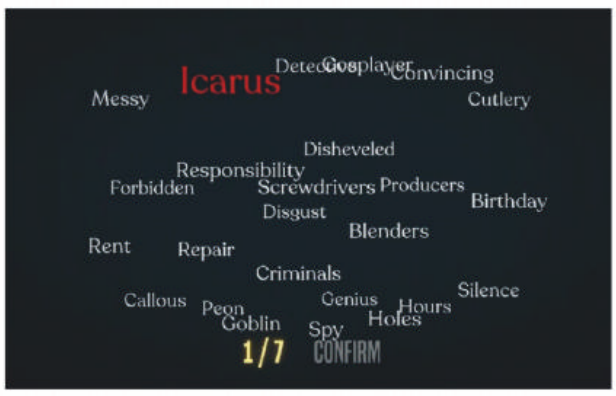
AC/DC: Australian rock band formed by two Scots
Bin chicken: Urban ibis birds, named for their love of garbage
Bin juice: The liquid at the bottom of the garbage
Fully: Extremely very
Goon: Cheap bag-in-a-box wine
Lamington: Sponge cake with chocolate and coconut
Oi: Hey, but in a dickhead way
Shithouse: Extremely very awful
Tradie: Worker with a trade, ie not a barista
Bloody: Very
Cuppa: Cup of tea
Dog's dinner: A mess
Durry: Cigarette

PC GAMER VERDICT

Necrobarista is affecting coffee shop philosophy with a side of funny comedy banter, plated rather attractively.

80

A traditional game of knifey-fingery.

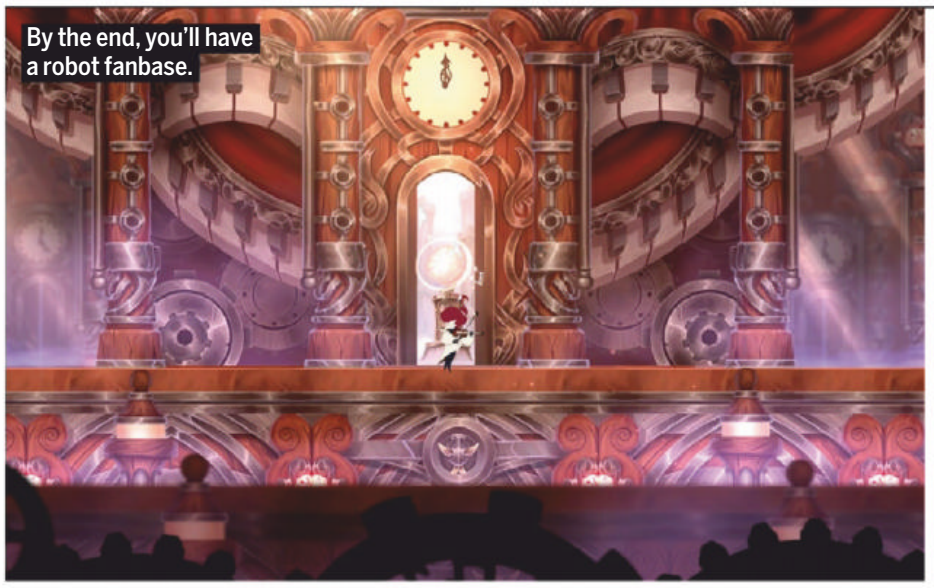


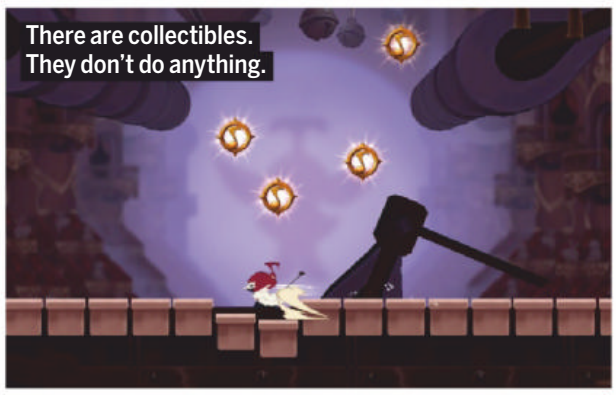
It's not a Studio Ghibli meal but it made me hungry.

These kids are cool but never seen again.

Everything on the menu is accurate.

COOL TITLES FOR NO CASH by Tom Sykes





CONCERT-OMG

Add another string to your bow with SYMPHONIA

You may be dodging spikes, whacking enemies, or clearing gaps in a platform game, but it matters *how* you do it, how the character feels as you fling them around the world. I'm happy to report that the violinist in *Symphonia* is generally a joy to control, leaping about the place with grace, and with a couple of moves that feel fresh, even in such a well-trammelled genre.

It's a music-themed platformer set in a sumptuous concert hall, stuffed with platforms and spikes that will kill you in one hit. There are no enemies to fight, but the later jumping challenges are difficult, requiring masterful use of your high jump and wall-hanging powers. While we've seen these in countless platformers before, they work differently here, in ways that will test your coordination and timing.

In most games you simply tap jump again in mid-air, to give your character additional height, but here you have to physically whack the ground with your violin bow, to perform a bigger leap – a nifty little ability that takes some skill to use, particularly on temporary platforms. Moreover, it looks, sounds and feels just lovely to bounce off the ground this way. We're always jumping on or off platforms in games, but rarely does it feel like we're making tactile contact.

Wall-hanging, similarly, offers a fresh spin on a genre staple. Your little violinist can cling tightly to certain walls, and then launch themselves off, in any clear direction, to bypass obstacles. These two moves interact nicely, as you leap around the world collecting musical notes and avoiding rows of spikes. Over its 20 minutes running time, the challenges escalate nicely – although there is a slight inexactitude to the wall-hanging that lets down the otherwise elegant controls.

It looks, sounds, and feels lovely to bounce off the ground

TALES OF...

Every so often you'll need to stop and actually *play* your violin, rather than using it to heft yourself up off the ground. There's a dedicated button for playing it, but only a handful of occasions in which your playing will actually achieve anything – and even then you're only performing to activate machines. You may as well be pulling levers. It would have felt more cohesive if your musical skills were integrated into the platforming somehow, but the music is pleasant enough to listen to all the same.

You could tell me this student-made project was a demo for a big-budget platformer and I'd believe you, so well-crafted is the orchestral music, the precise physics, and the fluid animation. The acrobatic little violinist is a well-defined character, brought gracefully to life, while the detailed backgrounds are a consistent visual treat. As I said, it's not a long game, ending fairly abruptly just as it's getting into the swing of things, and it could do more with its concert hall theme. But it's a beautiful prelude – if not quite a full performance – that nails the platforming fundamentals, and it won't set you back a penny. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A stylish musical platformer where you wield a violin

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
ISART DIGITAL

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
AMD A4-6300@3.7GHz, 6GB RAM, GeForce GT 610

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/SymphoniaGame

PC GAMER VERDICT

Symphonia could do more with its musical theme, but this is a fun-size platformer that feels great to control.

74

SOULMATES

Demaking *Dark Souls* with TYRANT'S REALM

D*ark Souls* but sci-fi. *Dark Souls* but 2D. *Dark Souls* but rubbish. I do enjoy a good *Dark Souls* clone, and here's another in *Tyrant's Realm*, which is *Dark Souls*, but made for the PS1.

Not literally, obviously, but this retro-styled action game is surprisingly convincing, boasting the jagged polygonal look, the slightly awkward combat system, and even the level design of a 32-bit game. The only thing letting it down is the framerate, which is disappointingly rock-solid, as smooth as velvet. *Real* PS1 games ran at 14fps, and we loved every chunky second.

Similar to *Souls*, you'll biff baddies in third-person as you explore a medieval prison, stopping occasionally to chug a potion. Combat's impactful, if perhaps a bit too simple and let down by a dodgy camera – another 32-bit mainstay.

But what stands out is how *TR* differs from *Dark Souls*. It's a series of linear levels rather than one interconnected space, and that's refreshing, while being more honest to the era. OK, this section is done, now onto the next, with no backtracking to pad out the experience. There's even a checkpoint of sorts before the boss, which is obviously heresy, but it felt *great* not to have to run a gauntlet before re-fighting it.

Where other *Souls*-likes try to move the genre forwards, or at least sideways, by adding new features or swapping out the setting, *TR*'s *backwards* step feels oddly refreshing. By adopting not just the look but the philosophy of a PS1 game, it's a leaner, less cluttered experience, and perhaps a good place to start if the stingy nature of the other *Souls*-likes has scared you off. ■

65

It's a fully featured action game, just very short.

At the start, your weapons are beefy punches and kicks.

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	LINK
Free	Tora Group	tora-group.itch.io

CHAIR-RAISING

Testing masculinity in HARD LADS

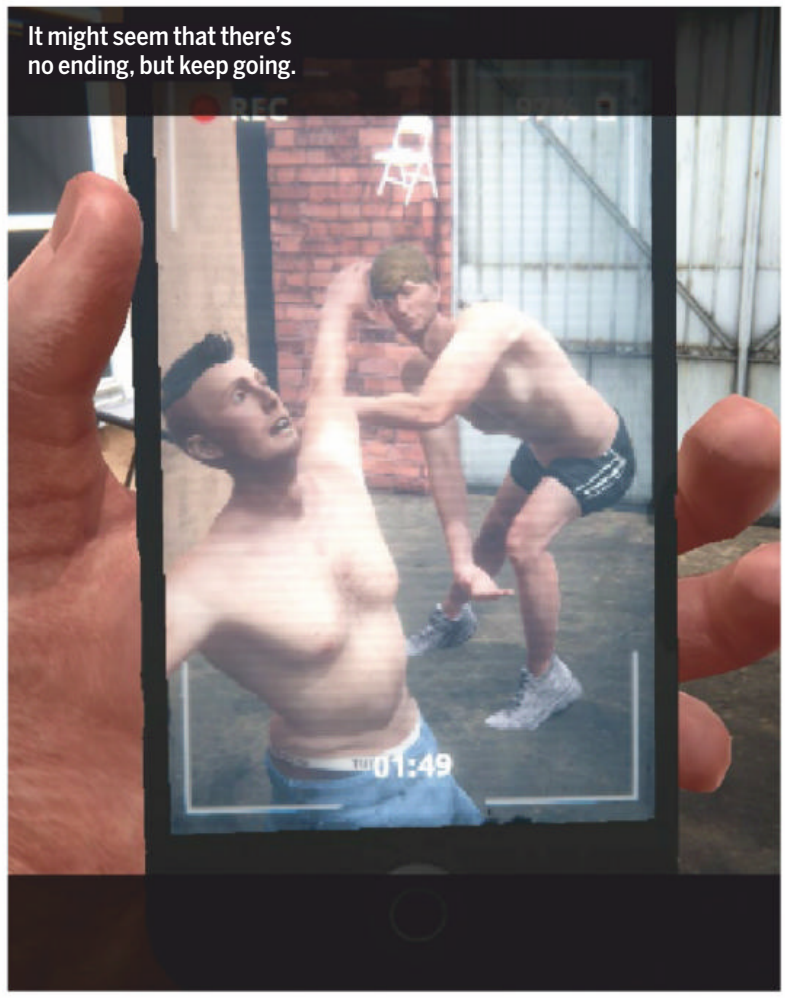
A few years ago, some men got together and decided to whack each other with a chair among other very silly things. The resulting video went viral, and now Robert Yang has made a game about it: a sort of interactive YouTube clip that you can replay and replay in search of answers, much like the video itself.

Yang likens the video to Icarus, but with a try-hard display of masculinity instead of a mad winged dash towards the sun. Ultimately, the chair lads fail as well, by stopping the display before someone gets *really* hurt. By generally being endearingly rubbish at being 'hard'.

It's a bold idea, making a playable version of a YouTube video, and by doing so Yang has put its constituent elements under a microscope. You play as the cameraman (perhaps the least 'hard' of the group), and by clicking on-screen icons you can direct the men to smoke, to drink, to wield the chair and to kiss each other, all of which happened in the original video. You can then perform the actions yourself, by moving the mouse or analogue stick. You can make the smoking turn into a lung-clearing hacking up, by moving the analogue all the way, or you can transform that quick peck into a full-on snog. It's a sort of 'hardness' slider, supported by a glitchy physics system that seems to collapse the more times you repeat the ritual.

This is both a considered companion piece and also a silly, funny thing, and I'm impressed by how accurate it is to the original video. Ultimately I got more from that video – and Yang's essay about it – than I did this game, but it's a fascinating exercise in adding interactivity to a piece of found art. ■

78



It might seem that there's no ending, but keep going.

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	LINK
Free	Robert Yang	radiatoryang.itch.io

OLD GAMES REVISITED by Matthew Elliott

I lose my game hack card if I don't include this screenshot.

BACK IN BLACKWELL

Repeating the nightmare of full-time education in LIFE IS STRANGE

Combining teenage awkwardness with the ability to control time should be a disaster. Most of us would never reach 20, endlessly retrying every mangled interaction with people we secretly like. The years would roll by, but we'd be trapped in bodies that replaced aching joints with warbling voices. *Life is Strange*, then, feels like a reminder that while our flesh turns to dust we can at least find solace in the fact we're no longer at school.

The first experience of academia in *Life is Strange* is like a prison for the achingly hip. There's the scheming preppie it-girl, a bullied Christian, and a suspiciously-handsome teacher whom one of the developers likely modelled on himself. At times it feels like teen angst written by middle-aged men, but I still get a sense of character and nuance. Most of the bad people aren't just bad. The good people can accidentally be asshats. This is the thing that I like most about it. It's hard to be cruel to people in *Life is Strange*, even when they're as horrid as Victoria, a venom-spitting sugar sculpture with a pixie cut. The characterisation is considered enough that I'm reluctant to be horrible in case there's some buried explanation for her attitude that will come back to ruin me later.

At times it feels like teen angst written by middle-aged men

Functionally, there are moments where it's less convincing. I spend at least five minutes searching for a CD, rummaging around the room of my frosty former best friend while she sits on the bed ignoring me. Step out of the 'I must do this thing next' mentality for even a second, and it's an excruciatingly awkward scene. That's a little unfair – this is a game, not a movie – but it's more noticeable because the opening of the game suggests I'll get to make my mistakes in real time. The puzzles, too, often feel like a stretch – like a backwards Rube Goldberg machine where the end goal is to pick up some tiny screwdrivers. And despite my limited knowledge, I'm certain that waif-like 18-year-olds don't gather in packs to discuss Henri Cartier-Bresson, in much the same way the PC Gamer team don't hang out and interrogate John Carmack's latest searing take on subsurface scattering. Or maybe they do and I'm not invited.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Sassy teen soap with supernatural powers

EXPECT TO PAY
Episode 1: free; Complete Season: £16

DEVELOPER
Dontnod

PUBLISHER
Square Enix

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700 CUP @ 3.60GHz, 16 GB RAM, NVIDIA GeForce GTX 1070, Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/32qLHws

PESKY KIDS

It'd be easy to gather up all these idiosyncrasies and be monstrous about *Life is Strange*, but I like the attempt to be lyrical, even if it sometimes feels like maudlin poetry on a toilet wall. The setting, too, makes it worth a visit: a crisp slice of autumnal Americana, where you can almost feel the crunch of frosty leaves and inhale the pumpkin pie. The decision making is fun – especially when you finish a chapter and wonder which one of your awful friends decided to blame their ex-bestie to save themselves. But even with the ability to rewind time, you can't escape the feeling that you've shat in your own cereal with every decision you make. Which is why I'd still be log jammed in my own youth if I'd had Max's powers at that age. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Overcomes what could have been an over-sentimental examination of small town friendships gone awry.

79

CAVE STORY

Heckling comedy chickens in UNDERTALE

Just as I tried to tiptoe through *Life is Strange* without offending anyone, I'm trying a pacifist run of *Undertale*. I regret nothing. Who'd think twice about heckling a comedy chicken until it gives up and goes away? Or flirting with a skeleton so hard that we end up going on the sort of date that makes you wince at strangers when you remember it years later? It makes me wish more games offered me the chance to have awkward conversations with monsters.

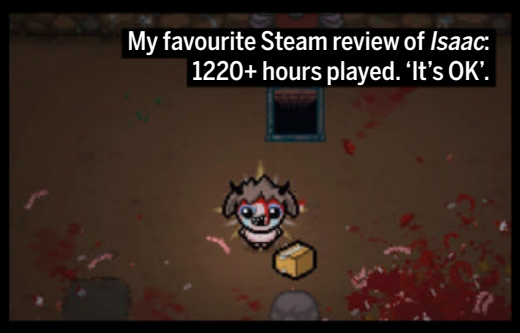
Refusing to attack anyone in *Undertale* is like trying to use Twitter without getting into any arguments, in that it involves constant avoidance and the overwhelming urge to use physical violence. *Unlike* Twitter, however, it feels rich, productive, rewarding. A pacifist run is also a wonderful way of seeing a different side of the game, and one that shows off how generous *Undertale* is in terms of specific responses to my stupid actions. Play enough games and you begin to get a sense of what's coming – narrative muscle memory that takes the drama out of every first-person, crevice-jumping cutscene. But with *Undertale*, I honestly have no idea what it's going to do next. Puzzles end up not being puzzles at all. Enemy encounters become micro brainteasers about the best way to placate a cheerful dog. And it's punctuated by those mournful, coming-of-age overtones that make it seem like innocence and childhood are melting away before your eyes. That's a lofty way of talking about a game influenced by Mr Bean and memes, but that's probably why *Undertale* coalesces into such a satisfying whole. Much like growing up, it's not something many of us set out to do; it happens when we're not watching. ■

92

Gaming 101: Evil laughs begin with an 'n' not an 'h'.

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER
£7	Toby Fox	In-house


My favourite Steam review of *Isaac*: 1220+ hours played. 'It's OK'.

THE BINDING OF ISAAC: REBIRTH

The Binding of Isaac is like reaching inside your food recycling bin on a warm day and finding a toy trumpet nestling inside. Yes, it's a fun surprise. But it's also crammed with rotten flesh and maggots. Yet despite being repellent, I can't help but toot on my offal cornet and delight as festering meat flies everywhere. *Isaac* is so vile that the story begins to lose all meaning. And more than this, the 'try, die, try again' loop is so perfectly numbing that all I can think about is the next room and the promise of a power up. Yes, I sold a child's soul to Satan. But look at my powerful tears! Doot doot! ■

90

This would be gorgeous if we weren't alone, trapped miles underground.

OXENFREE

There's a feeling you get in games that feature dialogue choices when you pick your response and you can already hear the rote, functional words in your head before they waft out of your speakers. *Oxenfree* isn't like that. I'm always surprised by the inventive, well-acted ways characters express themselves, but I still get the sense I'm in control. It's also rather nice to play something slow after *The Binding of RSI-saac* – and *Oxenfree* is *very* slow. It does mean I take the time to soak up all the arresting island vistas. But I'd be lying if I said I didn't tentatively tease the keyboard hoping to discover a run button, which feels like adding squeezy cheese sauce to a filet mignon steak. ■

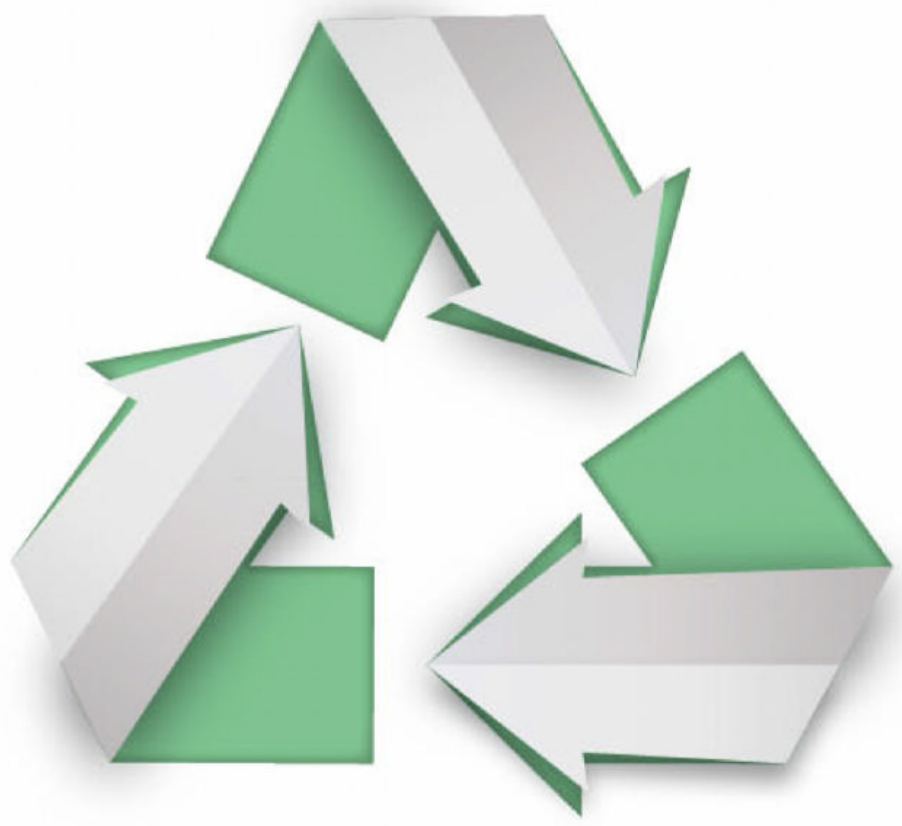
79

They're being chased by the robot, not the sinister older man.

NI NO KUNI WRATH OF THE WHITE WITCH REMASTERED

Some games are for Friday nights: sweaty handed, sugar-enhanced acts of defiance against the encroaching Saturday morning. But *Ni No Kuni* is made for crisp Sunday meandering – the genteel, adventurous background to a day spent doing as little as possible. The systems are old fashioned, the story is familiar, the puzzles practically non-existent. But it's so bright and beautiful and uplifting it barely matters. ■

81



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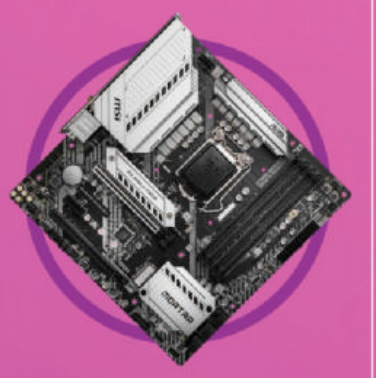


84

GROUP TEST

The best of Intel motherboards.

88

TECH REPORT

What ARM chips mean for the future of PC technology.

90

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build your perfect PC with our expert guides.

GROUP TEST

INTEL MOTHERBOARDS

The mothers of all boards. *By Jacob Ridley*

If you're planning a new gaming PC built around an Intel 10th Gen processor then you'll want to get hold of the best motherboard for the job. For most, that means one fit with either a Z490 or B460 chipset. These boards offer the widest range of ports, PCIe lanes, and features that attract us gamers.

1

2

ROG Maximum XII Extreme

ASUS **£830**

Best Z490 motherboard, for the price of a gaming PC

1 The Asus ROG Maximus XII Extreme doesn't make any sense from a performance per dollar standpoint, but it is the best. Beset with increasingly diminishing returns as it may be, this £830 motherboard is the definition of overkill PC gaming components – and it's excellent.

Packed with extra goodies, the Maximus XII Extreme leaves no stone unturned in order to achieve gaming greatness. Do you require Thunderbolt connectivity? There's an add-in card included in the box. Need more NVMe storage drives? Asus has seen fit to add a bonus 'DIMM.2' slot that allows for an extra two to be installed right next to your system memory.

If you want to maximise your processor's clock speed, while maintaining a modicum of reasonable thermal and power efficiency, the Maximum XII Extreme has you covered there too. In testing, it dealt with an all-core 5.3GHz overclock on an Intel Core i9 10900K processor with relative ease. It really can do it all – for a price.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Superb overclocking support
- Extra add-in cards
- Unrivalled build quality

SPECS SIZE: E-ATX / **MEMORY SUPPORT:** 4X DIMM, UP TO 128GB, DDR4-4800 (OC) / **EXPANSION SLOTS:** 3X PCIE 3.0 (X16/X0/X4 OR X8/X8X4) / **STORAGE:** 2X M.2, 2X M.2 (DIMM.2 BOARD), 8X SATA 6GBPS / **REAR USB:** 10X USB 3.2, 2X USB 2.0

MEG Z490 Ace

MSI **£382**

MSI's Z490 ace in the hole

2 Not only does the MSI Z490 Ace look great, it's capable of brushing up next to motherboards that are double the price in overclocking capability. That's largely thanks to a generous 16+1 phase VRM design with a capable heatsink and miniscule integrated fan that only whirrs to life when things get a little too toasty.

The rest of the motherboard is well thought out too. The top M.2 slot is easily accessible from above the GPU, which prevents your super-speedy NVMe SSD from overheating and throttling performance, and means you don't have to rip out your graphics card to reach it – saving you some hassle in the process. And that's always a good thing as these things can get fiddly.

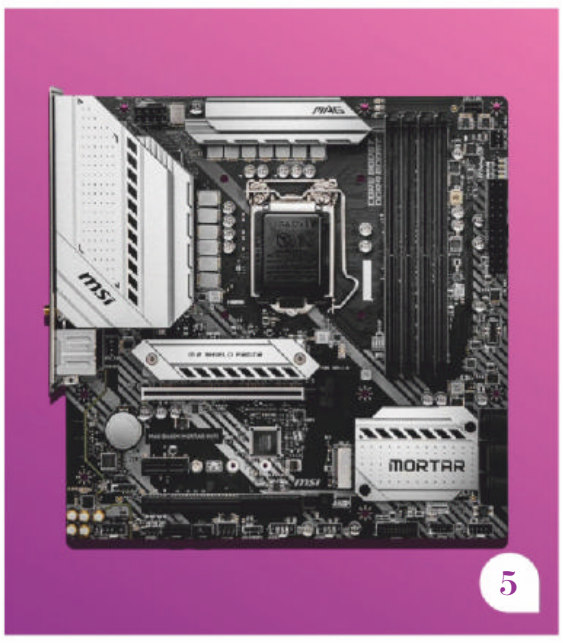
The Ace feels like the enthusiast-class motherboard that actually makes some sense. It's still an exorbitant amount of money to drop on what is essentially akin to that flat piece of Lego you build everything else atop of, but there's more to love about the Ace than merely snazzy gold trimmings.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Stylish
- Solid VRMs
- Great for overclocking

SPECS SIZE: ATX / **MEMORY SUPPORT :** 4X DIMM, UP TO 128GB, DDR4-4800 (OC) / **EXPANSION SLOTS:** 3X PCIE 3.0 (X16/X0/X4 OR X8/X8/X4), 2X PCIE 3.0 X1 / **STORAGE:** 3X M.2, 6X SATA 6GBPS / **REAR USB:** 6X USB 3.2, 2X USB 2.0

3



5

Z490 Aorus Master

GIGABYTE **£375**

Gigabyte's best Z490 is a luxurious Aorus

3 The Aorus Master, as its name suggests, is fully kitted out for a high-end gaming PC build. If the name alone doesn't convince you, the sheer mass of this motherboard will. From its weight alone, it's clear that Gigabyte has stuffed a lot onto this board – including 10 USB ports on the rear I/O panel and support for DDR4 speeds up to a whopping 5,000MHz (effective).

Past its surprisingly understated styling – by Aorus standards, at least – the Gigabyte offers decent performance only a touch behind those leading the pack. That's not too bad considering we're still talking about marginal gains at best across the entire spectrum of Z490 boards, and its reasonable price tag has it sitting pretty as a decent alternative to the pricey ROG and MSI boards.

If you really must have the best performance then you may want to look further afield. For everyone else, especially those who value ports and features above pure performance, there's the Aorus Master.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Solid construction
- USB ports aplenty
- Great onboard audio

SPECS SIZE: ATX / **MEMORY SUPPORT:** 4X DIMM, UP TO 128GB, DDR4-5000 (OC) / **EXPANSION SLOTS:** 3X PCIE 3.0 (X16/X0/X4 OR X8/X8/X4) / **STORAGE:** 3X M.2, 6X SATA 6GBPS | **REAR USB:** 6X USB 3.2, 4X USB 2.0

MPG Z490 Carbon WiFi

MSI **£260**

An affordable Z490 with competitive performance

4 I'll admit, even the significant savings of the MSI MPG Z490 Gaming Carbon WiFi still put it some ways off slipping in under the guise of an actual budget-friendly board. Still, what this Z490 motherboard offers in return for your moderate investment is few frills and top-of-the-line performance.

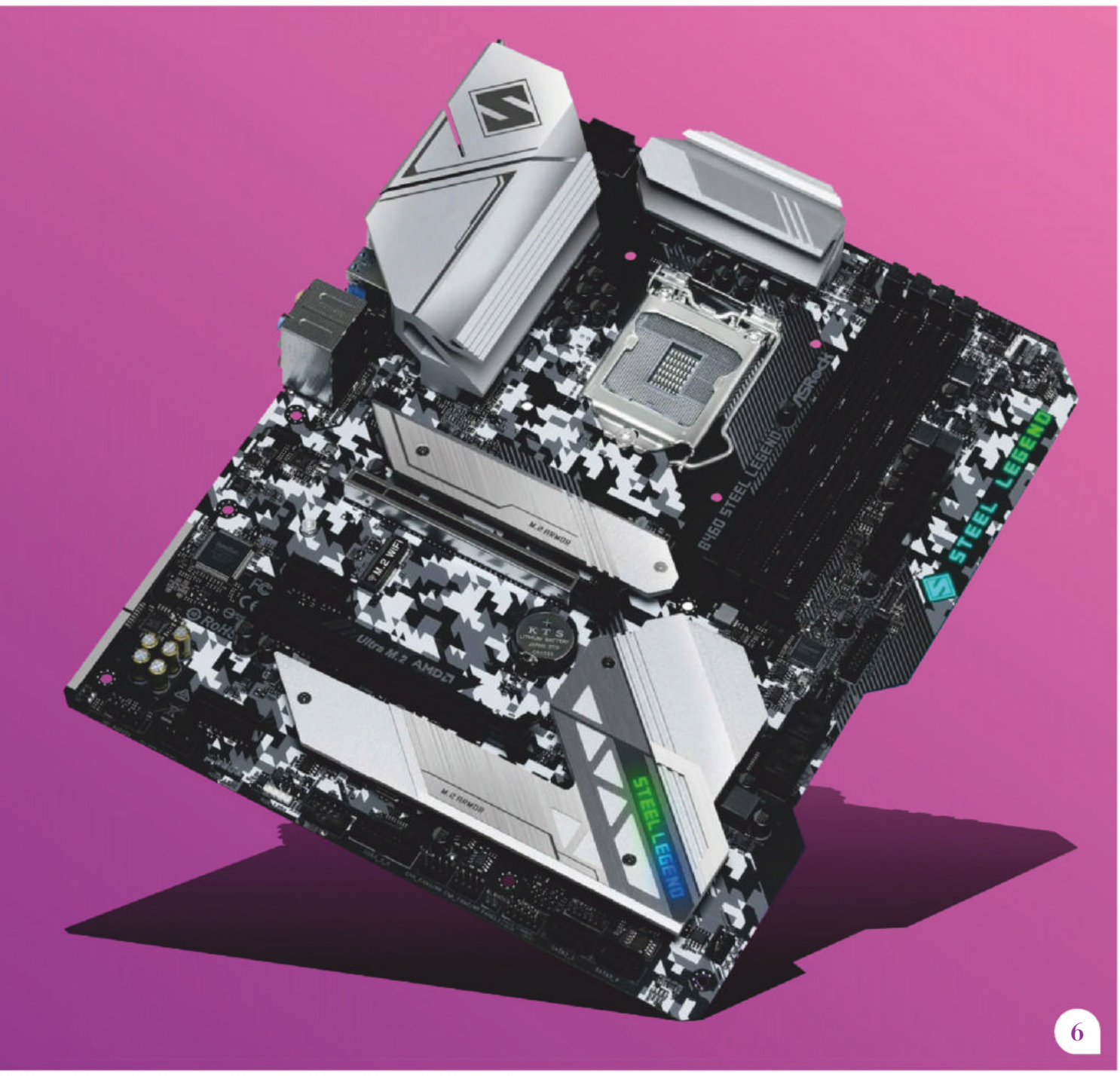
There's little in the way of added extras with the Gaming Carbon – but what it does, it does very well. There's practically nothing between most of the major brand Z490s we've tested, yet what sliver of performance there is to gain from a gaming motherboard nowadays, the Gaming Carbon secures during out of the box operation.

You may want to look elsewhere if overclocking is your forte. The Gaming Carbon is not quite up there as a motherboard suited to breaking barriers, and could not maintain the 10-core Core i9 10900K at near the same speeds as the Asus Maximus XII Extreme. Yet for just about every other potential use case it will certainly see you through.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Competitive performance
- Well-built
- Generous feature set

SPECS SIZE: ATX / **MEMORY SUPPORT:** 4X DIMM, UP TO 128GB, DDR4-4800 (OC) / **EXPANSION SLOTS:** 3X PCIE 3.0 (X16/X0/X4 OR X8/X8/X4), 2X PCIE 3.0 X1 / **STORAGE:** 2X M.2, 6X SATA 6GBPS / **REAR USB:** 5X USB 3.2, 2X USB 2.0



6

A TALE OF TWO CHIPSETS

Your choice of chipset will determine the overall specifications of your motherboard. With each new generation of chip, Intel will announce a handful of accompanying chipsets – fit to handle everything from enthusiast gaming down to basic business needs. Lucky for you, us gamers can generally narrow it down to just two: here that's the Z490 and B460.

The Z490 chipset is definitely at the top of the pile. It offers the maximum number of PCIe 3.0 lanes (24) and that means it can also deliver more connectivity for your devices across the board, which is just what we need. The exact specs of any given motherboard model is ultimately down to the manufacturer, although you can expect a high number of USB ports, PCIe 3.0 x8 support for dual GPUs, and a greater number of NVMe SSD ports. B460 boards are a little more restrained – they have access to only 16 PCIe 3.0 lanes, for starters – but as a result they're often significantly cheaper than the others.

MAG B460M Mortar WiFi

MSI £144

Cheaper than the best, performs like the rest

5 The MSI MAG B460M Mortar WiFi makes for an affordable gaming PC alongside one of Intel's mid-range CPUs. And don't for a second think that means sacrificing quality or performance. MSI has trimmed down the B460 Mortar with a deft hand, and you'll find a handful of ports, decent VRM, and many connectivity options.

The MSI Mortar is also slightly smaller than your usual run-of-the-mill motherboard. It's built to fit the Micro-ATX specification, which is a little shorter than the ATX specification endemic in modern PCs today. While the smaller motherboard will fit in most larger ATX cases, the benefit of mATX is that you can opt for a smaller PC case. Not only will this help you save space, they're also infinitely cuter too.

So if you want to load your new gaming PC onto your desk alongside your peripherals, or just save a little cash for the rest of your components, the MSI MAG B460M Mortar WiFi offers everything you need in a compact and affordable package.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Great value
- Plenty of ports
- Decent VRM

SPECS SIZE: MATX / **MEMORY SUPPORT:** 4X DIMM, UP TO 128GB, DDR4-2933 / **EXPANSION SLOTS:** 3X PCIE 3.0 (X16/X0/X1 OR X8/X8/X1) / **STORAGE:** 2X M.2, 6X SATA 6GBPS / **REAR USB:** 4X USB 3.2, 2X USB 2.0 /

B460 Steel Legend

ASROCK £145

An affordable ATX motherboard for Intel's 10th Gen

6 If you find yourself diametrically opposed to the lofty price of a Z490 then the soothing price tag and amenable feature set of the B460 Steel Legend is likely more your speed. It's a motherboard entirely fitting of its exceptionally gamer title: Steel Legend. A name with all the hallmarks of a failed 1980s war drama, probably starring Michael Biehn.

You will have to sacrifice some of the rear ports and WiFi connectivity in order to slide in at this lower price tag. The rear I/O is a little barren and might leave you settling for a USB hub instead. However, ASRock has cleverly placed a spare M.2 (Key E) port on the front of the board for those of you who wish to upgrade to a compact WiFi card.

With some of the best performance going in the B460 category, and despite some memory speed limitations that we were initially worried would hold it back somewhat, the Steel Legend just goes to show you don't need to spend an absolute fortune to get the most out of your CPU.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Price/performance sweet spot
- Brilliantly silly name
- Great for RGB builds

SPECS SIZE: ATX / **MEMORY SUPPORT:** 4X DIMM, UP TO 128GB, DDR4-2933 / **EXPANSION SLOTS:** 4X PCIE 3.0 (X16/X4/X1/X1) / **STORAGE:** 2X M.2, 6X SATA 6GBPS / **REAR USB:** 4X USB 3.2, 2X USB 2.0

Image credit: Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license. Author: Apollo439

TECH REPORT

ARM's global HQ in Cambridge, England, has a distinct *Deus Ex* vibe about it.

ARMED AND READY

Could a major change be coming to the insides of our PCs?

You may have missed it, but for the third time in its existence phone company Apple is moving its desktop computers to a new CPU architecture. This time, from the Intel X86-64 chips it moved to in 2006/7 and with which we're familiar with from our PCs, to its own designs based on the ARM chips we're familiar with from our smartphones and tablets.

The move has been mooted for a while, dating back to 2009 when Apple bought processor company PA Semi to develop chips for its iPods and iPhones, starting with the 800MHz, single-core, A4 chip in the 2010 iPhone 4 and first-generation iPad. Since then, the power of the chips has grown hugely, with the 2011 iPhone 4S (Apple A5, dual-core, 1GHz) showing a 68 percent gain in speed, and the A12X Bionic chip in the iPad Pro (2018, eight cores, 2.49GHz, seven GPU cores) showing benchmark results on a par with a Core i7, and AMD's Durango 2 graphics chip for the Xbox One S.

Leaked benchmarks from developer preview Mac minis equipped with the A12Z chip from the 2020 iPad Pro (usually eight cores, 2.49GHz, eight-core GPU), posted in flagrant disregard of Apple's T&Cs, show a 30 percent drop in performance when compared to a MacBook Air with a Core i3. That's nothing short of phenomenal, considering that the chip is not one intended to go into Macs, as it was downclocked and not operating on all cores in the mini, and the benchmark software was using the Rosetta 2 software translation layer to run. Apple has given a two-year timetable to move to Apple Silicon, by which time the glitches will be worked out, Rosetta 2 will be gone, and desktop-class Apple Silicon with who knows how many cores will be available.

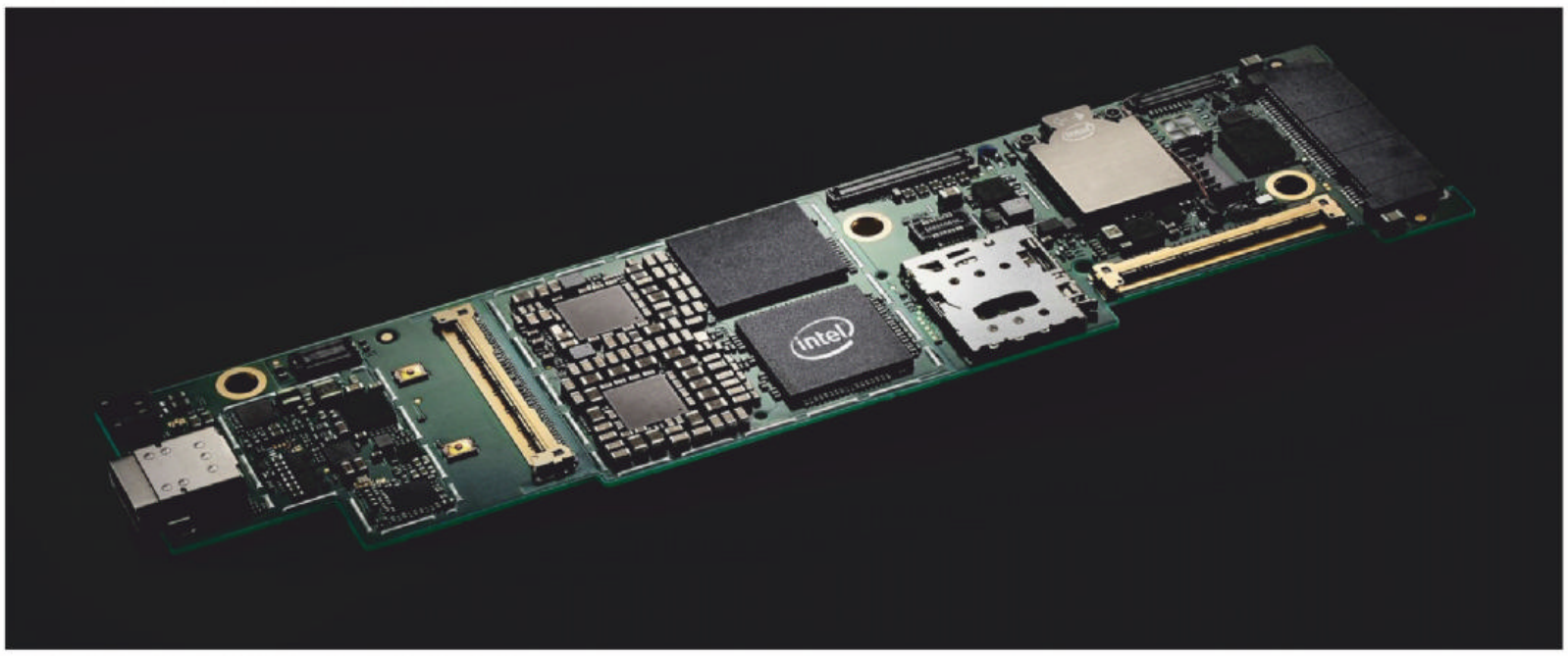
So what does this mean for our Intel- and AMD-dependent PCs? Apple is said to account for between two and four percent of Intel's sales, so there's no chance of Intel going bust any time soon, but if the computer of choice for architects, graphic designers, and techies has made the jump to ARM designs, what could be next? PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X are firmly in the X86 camp with their AMD chips, but Nintendo implements an ARM design in the Switch with its Nvidia Tegra chip. Could PlayStation 6 use ARM? Could your next PC?

SWITCHING IT UP

I spoke to Miguel Angel Horna, tech lead at game porting specialist Blitworks, which recently looked after Larian's *Divinity: Original Sin II* on its journey to the Switch, about how the two platforms differ. "From a programming perspective, modern compilers do a very good job of abstracting the architecture, so programming for any of the current platforms feels essentially the same," he says. "The biggest difference is mainly in the available performance. Usually, ARM platforms include less powerful CPUs and low-power GPUs, and this is

What is ARM?

ARM produces designs for RISC (Reduced Instruction Set Computing) chips and licenses them for other people to make. They're in 98 percent of mobile phones. RISC chips have a few benefits over CISC (Complex Instruction etc) in that they are more efficient, use less power and can be easily designed. But they're more reliant on properly written software and fast memory.



LEFT: Intel's new Lakefield CPUs use new 3D stacking technology to get their size down, and can contain different types of cores, something commonly seen in ARM's big. LITTLE designs.

ARM'S GREATEST HITS *ARM is everywhere, but most often crops up in low-power portable devices*

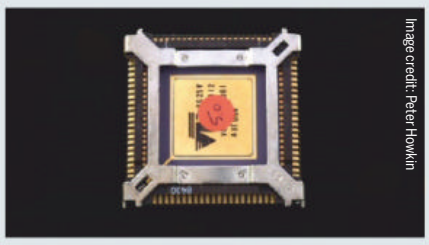


Image credit: Peter Howkin

1 GO NUTS
ARM's first chips went into the Acorn and BBC computers of the 1980s and let you play *Granny's Garden*.

2 NICE AS PI
Single-board computers love ARM chips, such as this Raspberry Pi 2 B with its 32bit ARMv7 Broadcom BCM2836.

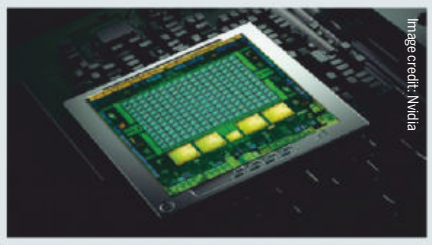


Image credit: Nvidia

3 AGENT OF SHIELD
This is the Tegra K1 from the Nvidia Shield Tablet. It's got a 32bit Cortex-A15 clocked up to 2.3GHz.

4 FORBIDDEN FRUIT
Here's an artist's impression of the A12Z Bionic from Twitter user @EveryApplePro.

important when you're trying to run a game at the best possible framerate. Sometimes the difference is minimal, sometimes the difference is big, it depends on the game."

What about PCs though? "On PC you have lots of cores, lots of memory so it's easier to work with," says Horna. "When moving [your code] to a home console, you have to start being careful, as there is a lot of available performance but you can only unlock it if your code is correctly laid out. The most difficult thing is moving [code] to a mobile architecture, where the performance is apparently there, but you can only get it if you are extra careful when laying out your code."

ARM has made great strides, implementing 64-bit modes and improved floating point support. "In the last years, both architectures have converged on a similar set of features that makes programming for any platform virtually transparent," says Horna. "As long as a portable language is used – C or C++ are the ones mainly used for games. X86 once lacked something that ARM architectures have: plenty of registers for the compiler to generate more optimised code, but this changed with x64, and now both platforms are very comparable in terms of supported instructions, and also even in single core performance. One thing is clear, with enough programming effort you can counteract the difference in performance, and that's why you can find games running on the Switch that were almost unthinkable a few years ago."

So it looks like we're seeing a convergence of hardware rather than one architecture dominating the other, with any gaps being filled in by software. Through this lens, Apple's decision seems more to do with taking control over the manufacturing of its CPUs than any 'death of Intel' scenarios. Apple is the only manufacturer of its hardware, even if it buys in chips, RAM, and SSDs from outside. A PC, in contrast, can contain tech from any number of AIB makers.

"THE BIGGEST DIFFERENCE IS MAINLY IN THE AVAILABLE PERFORMANCE"

ARM-LESS

"We don't think home consoles will change to ARM anytime soon," says Horna. "Mainly because of the way they are built. The technology is so complex that no manufacturer can do it on their own, they instead ask a chip manufacturer to do a custom design. There are very few companies capable of doing that: PC chip manufacturers and mobile chip manufacturers. Each is focused on a particular segment, usually performance on PC and efficiency on mobile. So while technically possible, it's not likely that a mobile chip manufacturer will suddenly start developing a super-high-performance chip, as it will have very few customers for it. Even Apple, whose chips are constantly challenging what we expect from mobile chips, is still embedding low-power GPUs that can't quite compete with their desktop counterparts.

"Our expectation is that we'll continue to see desktop components used in the most performant consoles, while mobile chips will be reserved for portable consoles or other lightweight devices such as the Apple TV."

To extend this, the X86 CPU in your PC is probably safe until desktop PCs and portable devices merge. ■

Ian Evenden

YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget

KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick the parts you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

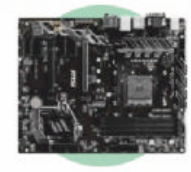
BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank

TOTAL

£849

MOTHERBOARD



B450-A Pro Max
MSI **£95**
A healthy dose of ports and PCIe SSD support has this B450 at the heart of our budget build.

PROCESSOR

Ryzen 3 3300X
AMD **£115**
AMD has packed its latest Zen 2 architecture into a speedy four-core package, and that's great for gaming.

GRAPHICS CARD

GeForce GTX 1650 Super
Gigabyte **£165**
The GTX 1650 Super is much more than a rebrand of the GTX 1650, securing it the budget crown.

COOLER

Wraith Stealth
AMD **Free with the CPU**
Gone are the days when a stock cooler was little more than a bonus paperweight. AMD's Wraith Stealth delivers.

MEMORY

Vengeance 8GB DDR4 (2x4GB)
Corsair **£40**
The new norm for gaming is 16GB, but dual-channel 8GB memory is enough to get by for most.

POWER SUPPLY

CX Series CX550
Corsair **£74**
Corsair's reputation for quality PSUs precedes them. You know you're in safe hands here.

SSD

WD Blue SN550 500GB
Western Digital **£67**
Just because it's a budget SSD, doesn't mean it has to be slow, as the WD SN550 proves with its speedy NVMe connectivity.

HDD

WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm
Western Digital **£37**
You don't necessarily need a HDD in 2020, but if you're a virtual hoarder, this'll give you loads of useful extra space.

CASE

Neos
BitFenix **£36**
You'll want to minimise how often you rebuild your PC, so make sure to give it a good home. This case'll do nicely.

DISPLAY

GW2280
BenQ **£105**
A 1080p60 VA monitor will see you through in style and, once you upgrade, will make a superb second monitor.

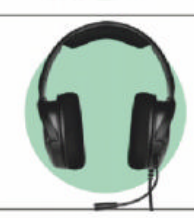
KEYBOARD

G213
Logitech **£40**
It may be a membrane switch board, but it's stylish, and well-built. Sometimes that's worth more than cheap clicky switches.

MOUSE

G102
Logitech **£35**
A classic shape delivered in a sleek shell, this mouse fits all hand sizes and grips. A solid option for the money.

HEADSET



HS35
Corsair **£40**
This headset delivers in-game with its punchy drivers and clear microphone – perfect for video calls and multiplayer alike.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games

TOTAL

£1,455

MOTHERBOARD		**B450 Tomahawk Max** MSI **£120** A reliable platform for your build, the Tomahawk Max also comes in black to complement any style.
PROCESSOR		**Ryzen 5 3600X** AMD **£198** This CPU is one of the greats, and uses the Zen 2 architecture to dominate in gaming and productivity.
GRAPHICS CARD		**GeForce RTX 2060 KO GAMING** EVGA **£320** The RTX 2060 is a taste of the good life, where frame rates are high and real-time ray tracing is possible.
COOLER		**Wraith Spire** AMD **Free with the CPU** We love a freebie, especially one as capable as the cooler included with the 3600X. This'll keep your machine running smoothly.
MEMORY		**Ballistix 16GB DDR4 (2x8GB)** Crucial **£75** With plenty of capacity at 16GB, this unembellished memory has everything you need for gaming and more.
POWER SUPPLY		**CX650M** Corsair **£93** The heart of your gaming PC is your PSU, and this 650W Corsair promises to keep your rig ticking nicely.
SSD		**S70 1TB** Addlink **£150** Building on a budget doesn't mean sacrificing speed—the Addlink S70 proves you can indeed have both.
HDD		**WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm** Western Digital **£37** Just like in the budget build, this HDD isn't strictly necessary, but for a pretty low price it's nice to have plenty of extra space.
CASE		**Eclipse P400S TG** Phanteks **£70** An ATX case is all you need for this build. We like this one because it's simple, functional, and really nice to look at.
DISPLAY		**AOC G2590FX** AOC **£173** Everything a PC gamer could want: 144Hz refresh rate, 1ms response time, and it's AMD FreeSync and Nvidia G-Sync compatible.
KEYBOARD		**Alloy FPS** HyperX **£80** As the name suggests, this keyboard is built like an absolute tank, with a steel frame and Cherry MX switches.
MOUSE		**Model O-** Glorious **£59** Lightweight and responsive, the Model O- has made a name for itself among streamers and pros thanks to its clever design.
HEADSET		**Cloud Alpha** HyperX **£80** Does it get any better than the HyperX Cloud Alpha? Well, yes, but not anywhere close to this sort of price point.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds

TOTAL

£3,742

MOTHERBOARD

NEW ENTRY

MPG Z490 Gaming Carbon WiFi
MSI **£260**
A heady mix of enthusiast motherboard functionality and build quality that stops short of god-tier motherboard pricing.

PROCESSOR

NEW ENTRY

Core i9 10900K
Intel **£529**
If you want the fastest gaming CPU, look no further than Intel's flagship Core i9.

GRAPHICS CARD

GeForce RTX 2080 Super XC
EVGA **£762**
The RTX 2080 Super is the more reasonably priced super high-end enthusiast graphics card out of the Nvidia skunkworks.

COOLER

Kraken X63
NZXT **£123**
One of the most stunning AIO coolers rebuilt with an updated pump and, of course, RGB lighting for more pizzazz.

MEMORY

Vengeance RGB Pro 32GB DDR4 (2x16GB) @ 3,200
Corsair **£176**
If you truly want to show off, even your system memory should be aglow in RGB.

POWER SUPPLY

HX750i 80 Plus Platinum
Corsair **£163**
Platinum doesn't just sound good, it means this PSU is rated to the highest tiers of energy efficiency, too.

SSD

WD Black SN750 1TB
Western Digital **£169**
Western Digital are back on Samsung's heels with this brilliantly fast, yet affordable, 1TB M.2 NVMe SSD.

HDD

860 QVO 2TB
Samsung **£195**
Built on QLC flash memory, it's not the quickest storage around, but it's a speedy alternative to a HDD.

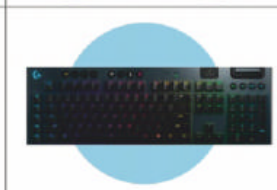
CASE

600C
Corsair **£135**
If you're going big on parts, you should grab a case that has plenty of room for upgrades down the line. This one will do just fine.

DISPLAY

Nitro XV273K
Acer **£780**
This one's an easy choice – 4K and 144Hz for under a grand is an offer we can't refuse, and neither should you.

KEYBOARD

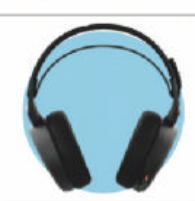


G915 Lightspeed
Logitech **£210**
Low-profile mechanical switches are just the icing on the cake that is the superb, wireless Logitech G915.

MOUSE

G502 Lightspeed
Logitech **£110**
With a lengthy battery life and a phenomenal sensor to keep you gaming at your best, the G502 is undoubtedly one of the finest.

HEADSET



Arctis 7 Wireless
SteelSeries **£130**
If you've settled on a wireless keyboard and mouse, the last thing you want is a pesky cable to your headset.

EXTRA LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING

Storms add a nice bit of drama to any flight.

"It's really mind-blowing that anywhere I can think of, I can fly to"

Escaping lockdown through MICROSOFT FLIGHT SIMULATOR

Man, I really miss travelling. I miss the excitement of boarding a plane and stepping off into another country. I miss the change of scenery and drinking weird beers while heavily jet lagged. I even miss airports, although I'm not sure why. Being stuck in the UK has been the hardest part of the lockdown for me. So, really, the new *Microsoft Flight Simulator* couldn't have come along at a better time.

The latest version of the long-running flight sim is a remarkable technical achievement, letting you fly anywhere in the world. And that's not an exaggeration – the entirety of the planet Earth is in the game, and can be freely explored. You spin a globe around, click where you want to go, and (after a loading screen) you're flying over it. And not only that, but it looks amazing too, especially in 4K, with dynamic weather, gorgeous 3D clouds, and some incredibly atmospheric thunderstorms. It's a game worth upgrading your PC for.

So to make up for not being able to travel, I've been spending hours doing it virtually. I've taken my plane to the Grand Canyon, Hawaii, Icelandic glaciers, the Amazon rainforest, the Pyramids, the Himalayas, Hong Kong, Norway's Lofoten Islands, and more places than I could ever list here. It's easy to lose entire evenings to this game, telling yourself you'll visit just one more place before bed, which inevitably turns into ten.

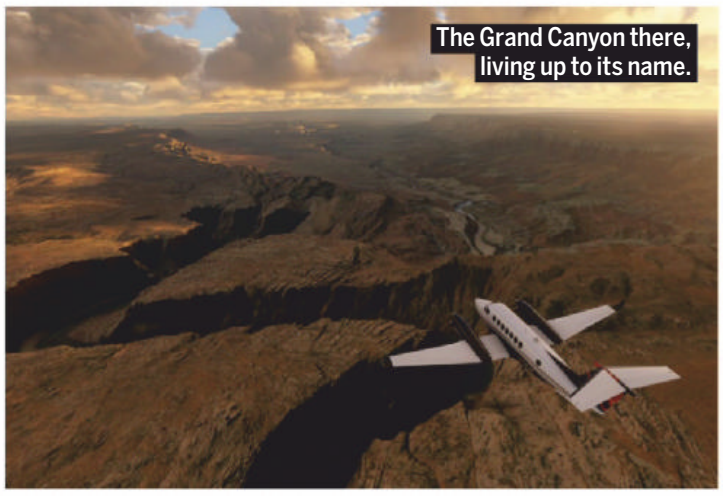
It's really mind-blowing that anywhere I can think of, I can fly to. I like visiting less glamorous places too,

THE ENTIRETY OF THE PLANET EARTH IS IN THE GAME AND CAN BE FREELY EXPLORED

ANDY KELLY

THIS MONTH
Couldn't go on a real plane, so flew an imaginary one.

ALSO PLAYED
Yakuza Kiwami 2


The Grand Canyon there, living up to its name.

Flying over Tokyo at night. The city stretches for miles.

like Glasgow, where I grew up, and Bath, where the PC Gamer offices are. There's something thrilling about seeing a faithful depiction of a place you know well in a videogame. The algorithm gets some details wrong if you look really closely, but from high in the air, the accuracy is impressive.

SKY HIGH

A lot of simulator games are kinda sterile. They're more concerned with the function of whichever vehicle or career they're simulating, not the emotion. But when I play *Microsoft Flight Simulator*, I find myself in a constant state of wonder. I mean, it's no replacement for the real thing. As realistic as the game's world looks, it still doesn't match visiting another country for real. But it's exciting in its own way, and a lot cheaper and safer – especially these days.

Microsoft couldn't have picked a more perfect time to release this game. As we all retreat into our houses and flats, dodging each other on the street, hiding behind masks, playing *Microsoft Flight Simulator* feels really special. I also love that the game has enough assists and accessibility features that it's possible to play it on the sofa with an Xbox controller. I have a flight stick, and it really adds to the simulation element, but sometimes all I wanna do is sit back and fly over somewhere without wrestling with the controls. I don't know when I'll get to travel again, but this'll do for now. ■

This here? This is what you don't want to happen.

"It is a bit like violent line dancing"

Living on the grid in LEGEND OF GRIMROCK

ROBIN VALENTINE

THIS MONTH
Remembered how much I love graph paper.

ALSO PLAYED
Alder's Blood, Tabletop Simulator

For years, I just assumed *Legend of Grimrock* wasn't for me. That unnatural, grid-based movement! Weird real-time combat, where you have to awkwardly dance around enemies! That's too old school even for my sensibilities.

It took James' impassioned arguments for the series in last month's Top 100 deliberations to make me finally reconsider and give it a try. Lo and behold, it might be my favourite game I've played this year – not despite those eccentricities, but largely because of them.

The entire game takes place in one sprawling dungeon, full of monsters, traps, and puzzles. It's an incredible space, intricately designed and a joy to explore. Countless secrets to discover turn a world of drab stonework into a vast puzzle box you can't help but want to map every inch of. And if it wasn't for those awkward mechanics that put me off at first, it wouldn't work.

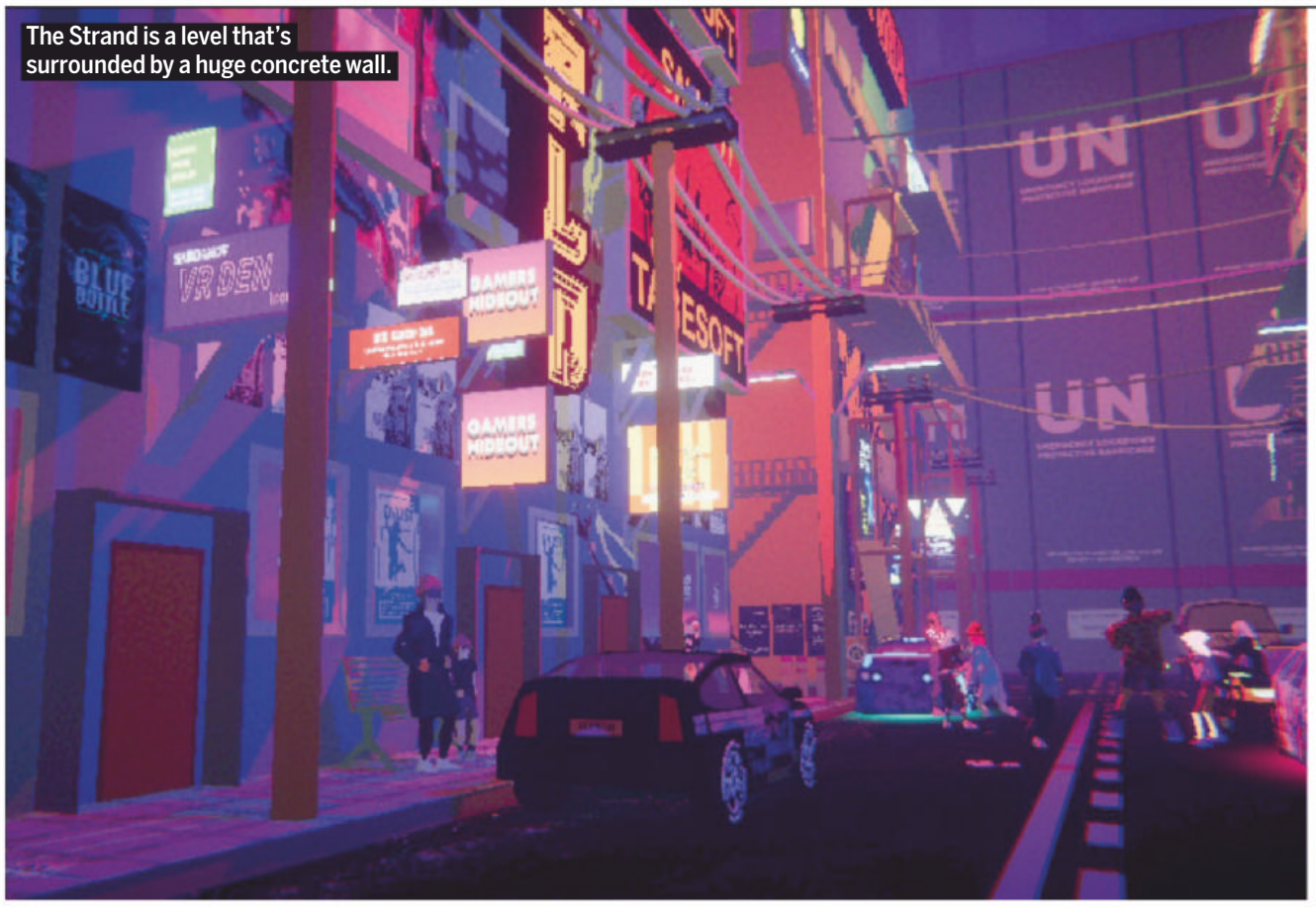
The limited range of movement provides absolute clarity to your exploration. You move square-by-square, making navigation totally unambiguous, and you can only turn in 90-degree increments, so there are only so many ways you can look at things. That allows the developer to build a simple visual language for puzzles, hidden buttons, and secrets – you don't miss things just because you were looking from the wrong angle, and you can approach each room in a pleasingly methodical way.

DANCE MAGIC

Monsters move on the same grid, and at first fights do feel quite strange. The best tactic is to always be side-stepping and turning – as long as you're a little faster than them, you can get free hits at their sides while they manoeuvre about.

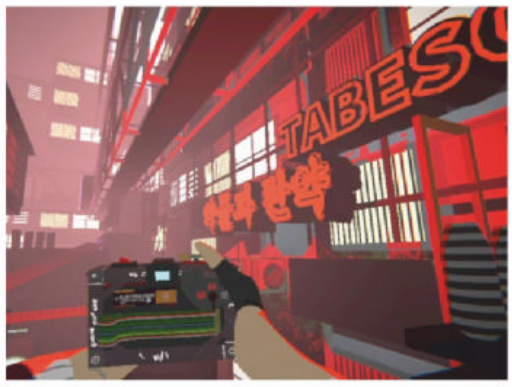
Much as it is a bit like violent line-dancing, it makes your environment incredibly important. You can only side-step if you're in an appropriately sized space, so corridors are dangerous – best to lure monsters to open ground, then. But draw the ire of more than one, and the dance becomes more complicated – if you let them surround you, you can't move and you're toast.

As you progress, monsters and puzzles push the design space in ever more mind-bending ways, until you reach a final boss who's a work of hilariously mad genius. Far from boxing it in, *Legend of Grimrock*'s grid is what makes the game so special. Shows what I know. ■



The Strand is a level that's surrounded by a huge concrete wall.

Adjusting the bloom on this photo gives it a dream-like quality.



"Bounties begin by challenging you to photograph trendy boomboxes"

UMURANGI GENERATION guides your eye to look at a stylish city in a different way

When it comes to playing games, I'm a screenshot hoarder. I can't resist stopping to snap a beautiful landscape or pausing to nab a well-timed dynamic moment. I'll play any game that indulges my screenshot obsession, and when it comes to taking pics, *Umurangi Generation* is as indulgent as a chocolate bubble bath.

This stylish first-person photography game lets you run around a futuristic city, snapping and editing pictures as you go. You're given a set of photo objectives to complete, but you also have the freedom to take a few – or a lot – of your own shots. You can take pictures from multiple angles, switch through different camera lenses, and experiment with image adjustments to create your ideal photo.

Although you're free to wander wherever you like, the photo bounties push you to explore the city in new ways rather than just on the ground level. One bounty tasks me to take a picture of six seagulls in a single photo, and I have to navigate my way through the higher levels of the city to get the perfect shot, leaping from billboard ledges, climbing fire escapes and dropping from balconies. It's like a photographer's playground.

RACHEL WATTS

THIS MONTH
Went through about 50 rolls of film.

ALSO PLAYED
Ooblets, Hades

You begin with a standard lens and get access to new pieces of shiny camera kit to play with as you go. Wide-angle, fisheye, and telephoto lenses let you mess with space and perspective, and you can adjust the zoom and focus to highlight features of the image. Every time you take a shot, you'll also get the option to mess with the colour grading, making for some really wild photos. But, as you happily snap city skylines, graffiti and halfpipes, an ugly reality hides beneath the sun-kissed visuals.

Exploring each environment in *Umurangi Generation* reveals the story of a troubled city. As you begin to complete each photo bounty, your eye is cleverly guided to what is really happening. Bounties begin by challenging you to photograph trendy boomboxes and skateboards, but they take a serious turn when you're asked to take pictures of candlelit memorials, enlisting posters, and armed soldiers. In one level, the lo-fi soundscape masks the din of warfare as sounds of gunfire and fighter planes melt into the music.

EXPLORING EACH ENVIRONMENT REVEALS THE STORY OF A TROUBLED CITY

SNAP JUDGEMENT

Taking pretty photos in games is fun, but *Umurangi Generation* gives your photography purpose. Your shots are a record of a historic event, proof of what went down in this city under siege. Seeing the city through different lenses challenges you to think of this environment in a more meaningful way.

It's the destruction, or rebirth, of a new world, but still holds its own kind of beauty. It tells the story of creative young people who have to live through a self-described "shitty future". While it might seem like *Umurangi Generation*'s world is hopeless, its vibrant environments and characters bring life back to a city that's in crisis. ■

"Waste time on a catch-up and you risk freezing to death or drowning"

Playing WE WERE HERE TOGETHER when you're held apart

Most of my friends are in cities I can't get to right now. Manchester, Birmingham, Norwich – places that, between public transport being sold as a virus-ridden deathtrap and my own stubbornness to never get behind the wheel of a car again, have been moved from the mental folder marked 'just down the road' to 'effectively in a different country'. In theory, gaming should be the perfect solution but – the odd screen-shared game of *Jackbox* aside – I haven't been able to settle on one during lockdown. Until now.

The *We Were Here* games are co-op adventures that deposit you and a friend in far-off wings of a castle built out of escape rooms. Standing between you and any hope of reunion is a string of puzzles almost as vexing as the lockdown restrictions. And the only way you can communicate is via the slightly unreliable voice calls on your walkie-talkies. As gaming metaphors for 2020 go, it's almost painfully on the nose.

It's also a very pleasant way of hanging out with friends you miss dearly. Don't expect to fit in any chat about real life – waste time on a catch-up and you risk freezing to death or drowning – but really, in this eternal Groundhog Day, what does anyone actually have to talk about anyway? Instead, you'll be frantically communicating what you can see on screen, trying to piece together a puzzle you can each see one half of.

This means a lot of figuring out how to describe symbols to one another (a lot of which, I swear, the devs have made look like dicks) and trying to translate flat schematics into the 3D space your partner is stood in. It's the Crystal Maze, by way of that bit in The Matrix where Neo's on the phone to his Operator as he legs it through an apartment block, and his man in real life tells him to take a left – "no, the other left!".

ALEX SPENCER

THIS MONTH
Used cooperation to get out of a sticky situation.

ALSO PLAYED
Alan Wake, Totally Accurate Battle Simulator

AS GAMING METAPHORS FOR 2020 GO, IT'S ALMOST PAINFULLY ON THE NOSE

ALONE TOGETHER

The game trades on these little gaps in human communication. Faced with rising lava, it can suddenly become difficult to remember the names of colours you've known since before school. But there are moments you feel like a genius too – like when I realised the cubes we were trying to compare were basically dice. "Do you have a D6?" My companion laughs in response, and I just know he was already turning one over in his hands.

Speaking as someone who refuses to let go of couch co-op and move to this 'online' world, *We Were Here Together* is the rare game that turns the distance between players into a virtue. If you've played *Keep Talking and Nobody Explodes*, you'll know that, without the confines of a VR helmet, the separation between bomb defuser and manual-reader can feel artificial. Here, because your screens are miles apart, those walkie-talkies really do feel like a lifeline. Which, again, might be a little on the nose. ■

Is it just me, or is that definitely stained-glass Tony Stark and Thor?

Oh, this room. A hateful place.

FINAL FANTASY XIV: SHADOWBRINGERS

Now is the perfect time to try Square Enix's MMO. *By Steven Messner*

This used to be the best MMO that I hated to recommend to new players. Its episodic story resembles a lot of great TV shows, with expansion-like seasons that peel back new layers of mystery and drama while evolving its core characters in exciting ways. But, like many television classics, *FFXIV*'s 'first season', called *A Realm Reborn*, isn't nearly as good as its later expansions. It's hard to appreciate what makes the MMO so wonderful when its first 40 hours are a total slog.

But on August 11, *FFXIV*'s 5.3 update titled *Reflections in Crystal* launched, adding the usual slate of new raids, dungeons, and story quests that veterans have been pining for. But two other features in that patch finally make *FFXIV* a game I can recommend to just about everyone. *Final Fantasy XIV*'s free trial and *A Realm Reborn* both got a big overhaul. Now, everything up to and including *Heavensward*, the first expansion, is free to play with only a few restrictions and every one of *A Realm Reborn*'s quests have been overhauled to make them faster and less grindy. Even if you don't intend to buy the game and subscription to keep playing after beating *Heavensward*, Square Enix is basically giving one of the best JRPGs of the last few years away for free. If ever there was a time to start playing *Final Fantasy XIV*, it's now.

That's a huge change from the previous free trial, which only let players level to 35 before asking them to cough up money. But the problem with that free trial is by that point, you've barely experienced any of what makes *FFXIV* such a remarkable game. Like a lot of Japanese RPGs, *FFXIV* is a slow burn that takes its time fleshing out the world and characters so that when it eventually puts them in perilous circumstances, there's a genuine emotional investment that makes *FFXIV*'s drama electric.

This is most evident in *Heavensward*, which takes place directly after the events of *A Realm Reborn* and sees players venture into the snowy realm of Ishgard where a religious city-state is locked in an eternal, bloody war with a clan of dragons. If you're a fan of *Final Fantasy*, *Heavensward* reaches the same heights as some of the series' best games. A war with dragons might sound cliche, but there's a lot of nuance in how the story is told.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
August 24, 2013

DEVELOPER
Square Enix

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
finalfantasyxiv.com

TRIMMING THE FAT

Getting to that point, though, used to be a real pain. During an interview, game director and producer Naoki Yoshida explained that the team was so hard-pressed rebuilding *FFXIV* after its disastrous first launch that they didn't have much time to create a proper story campaign. "In order to mitigate that, we set a rule that [each] quest would have a certain number of experience points delivered, and that it would take about nine minutes to complete each quest," Yoshida said.

That nine-minute rule, though, makes *A Realm Reborn* a real chore to play as even the most inconsequential quest is drawn out for the sake of extending the overall story's runtime. For the most part, that meant filling each quest with pointless objectives, the epitome of fetch quests. With update 5.3, however, the team have gone back through nearly every quest and shortened the amount of steps required to complete them, resulting in much better pacing and far less padding without sacrificing any of the important worldbuilding and character development that becomes so critical to the emotional drama of the later expansions.

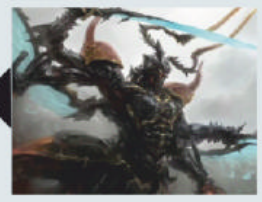
IT MAKES FFXIV RIDICULOUSLY ACCESSIBLE TO NEW PLAYERS

It's a welcome change that, along with the new free trial, makes *FFXIV* ridiculously accessible to new players. If you play and make it to *Heavensward*, you know you have two more equally great expansions still waiting to be played, but if you decide that *FFXIV* just isn't for you, all you've done is wasted a bit of time – and far less than you would have a few months ago before the changes. As a long time fan of the game, it's exciting that more players than ever will have an opportunity to discover what makes *FFXIV* so beloved. ■

BEST TO WORST

Final Fantasy XIV's *content ranked*

SHADOWBRINGERS
It's got everything: A great villain, a dimension-spanning story, and big-time payoff for some of the story's biggest mysteries.
Our original review score: 94



HEAVENSWARD
Sad dragons, religious zealots, lots of Moogles, and a surprisingly poignant story.
Our original review score: 87

STORMBLOOD
Though the story pulls a few too many punches, the gorgeous setting and epic boss battles keep *Stormblood* fun.
Our original review score: 92

A REALM REBORN
The base game sometimes is a little too mundane compared to its expansions, but it ends with a banger of a boss fight.
Our original review score: 79

The free trial basically gives players a great 70-hour JRPG for free.

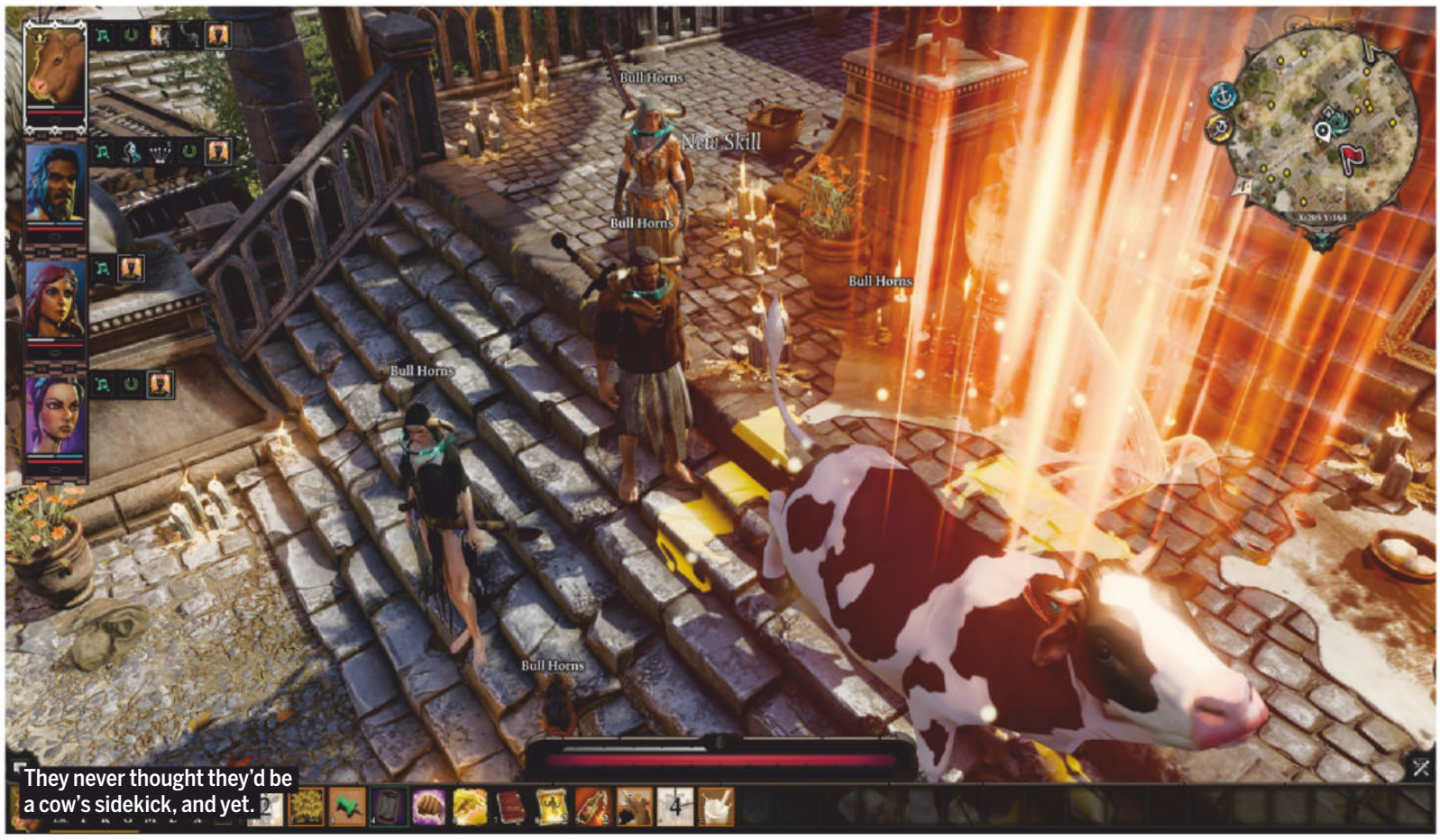
Next to the current expansion, *Heavensward* is *FFXIV* at its best.

Trimming down *A Realm Reborn* fixes one of *FFXIV*'s biggest issues.

Free trial players will also get access to new jobs like the dark knight and machinist.

MAJOR MODS, ANALYSED

Not an advisable use for a Lute, but it works in a pinch.



They never thought they'd be a cow's sidekick, and yet.

Ifan's spectral bow is reliable, even if he holds it wrong.

DIVINITY: ORIGINAL SIN II

Cool modded classes for Larian's RPG. *By Lauren Morton*

Even if you've not personally played Larian Studios' giant RPG adventure *Divinity: Original Sin II*, you've probably seen evidence of the hectic, turn-based combat. Do screenshots of battlefields consumed by fire ring any bells? For me, the impromptu frying pan to fire situation would result in a party wipe, a reload, and an attempt to tackle the battle from a new angle with new skills, or painstakingly placed barrels of oil. Which then begets another 'floor is lava' situation. Whoops.

Nothing evidences how much I enjoy tinkering with *Original Sin II*'s combat more than the fact that Steam reports my play time with the game is double what's actually logged into my single save file. While I look longingly at Larian's next RPG epic, *Baldur's Gate III*, debating whether to tackle it in Early Access, it seems like a great time to finally uncork a second playthrough of *Original Sin II*. I've had my fair share of fun with the standard styles, so this time I'm digging into custom classes created by modders. Lucky for me, they're never short on creativity. After perusing the class mods in the Steam Workshop for *Original Sin II*'s *Definitive Edition*, I settle on four classes to turn each of my four chosen party members into tricky new tools for the fire-filled fights of Fort Joy and beyond.

TRICKSTER

As someone who got a lot of joy from the standard Polymorph class in *Original Sin II*, I knew I absolutely had to try Helaene's Trickster class. You really can't just pass up on the opportunity to terrorise enemies as a cow. It's full of other transformations in the later levels – roosters, spiders, and coyotes – along with practical jokes throughout. I handed this class off to Fane the ancient skeleton, naturally. Despite his haughtier than thou attitude, I figure Fane is closest in spirit to being a flippant god of gags, pranks, and japes.

Early on I rely heavily on my cow transformation. It's pretty silly, sure, but like the other animal transformations it grants three other temporary skills usable in that form. Moo-ve Over lets you avenge every cow that's been wrongfully tipped by throwing back enemies surrounding you by several metres.

I spent almost every early fight back in Fort Joy having Fane use the Herd Mentality skill that grants all his party members their own set of horns and the temporary Bull Rush skill. It turns out, AI allies really like using it to charge and knock down enemies, turning a few fights with random friends into some serious bovine stampedes.

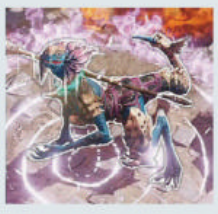
THE SPIDER FORM UNLOCKED AT LEVEL EIGHT ALLOWS FOR SOME STICKY CROWD CONTROL

Honestly, I would have nearly been happy to just play about turning Fane into an ancient ungulate but the later skills are a treat too. The spider form unlocked at level eight allows for some sticky crowd control abilities, while the later coyote form can turn your entire party into a pack of hairy hunters for two turns.

One of the Trickster's few drawbacks is the laughing animation that your character does, which takes a couple seconds to play after certain skills. It's not an egregious gag, but it did have me scratching my head

CLASS ACT

More custom combat styles by Helaene



MIRAGE
Here's a chaotic illusionist capable of summoning spectral fighters to their side. The Mirage class can compound negative statuses, hide allies from view, and more.

BLACKSMITH
The Blacksmith class works well as a tank to soak up damage. They're able to support allies by restoring physical armour and standing their ground against enemies.

SUCCUBUS
The Succubus class can lull enemies to sleep and electrify them with their good looks. They're intended to be played as archers with skills scaling based on the Scoundrel ability.

more than once, wondering what the holdup was before my next move.

GRAVEWALKER

If anyone were to inherit the ghostly abilities of resident Lord of the Rings spinoff sad man Talion it of course needed to be *Original Sin*'s own gruff guy Ifan. I preferred Ifan as an archer during my original playthrough, so granting him the ghostly archer skills felt like it was a natural fit.

Malchezzar's homage to *Shadow of Mordor* pulls no punches. Like Talion, the gravewalker doesn't permanently die in a fight. Even if he's killed, Ifan will be resurrected three turns after being killed. I never saw the ability in action myself though. In practice, losing my primary melee character meant that a fight was going downhill fast. More often than not, my entire party would wipe out on the slippery slope of death before Ifan could gravewalk his way to save them.

More fun than Talion's existential angst are his combat abilities that the Gravewalker class emulates. His Elf-Shot ability summons a spectral bow which can be shot five times before he needs to refill the quiver by using Consume on an enemy.

A small quirk of the class is that each time you shoot the Gravewalker's spectral bow, the game believes you've swapped back from a ranged weapon to a two-handed sword, prompting you each time that you've regained the All In skill specific to large melee weapons. On the bright side, the class allows you the versatility of ranged and melee combat without actually spending the action points to swap between weapon types during a fight.

Despite being based on a totally different fantasy setting, the Gravewalker felt like the most straightforward fun of the classes I tried. It doesn't take too much strategising to turn a Gravewalker into a Rivellon ravager.

SAD LADS

Two peas in a brooding pod

	Talion	Ifan
Very particular set of skills	✔	✔
Avenging some dead folks	✔	✔
Actually undead	✔	✘
Currently not dead	✘	✔
Sad lad eyes	✔	✔

BARD

Naturally, Baardvaark's Bard class went to Lohse. I'm normally a slash and dash style player, opting for brute force damage per second and neglecting any classes described as 'support', but being a Bard was a great incentive to dip into the buffing and debuffing territory.

Bard's skills complement each other like melodies and harmonies. Lullaby does magical damage and puts a target to sleep, while Dream Scream wakes them up by inflicting damage and random status effects. Jingle applies random positive statuses to party members – granting unplanned possibilities when a party member is granted something like the Floating status that makes them invulnerable to surfaces like fire or slowing puddles of oil. Useful for sudden fiery infernos. Swindle can steal positive statuses from a target and apply them to the bard. For a payoff, Resonance removes positive statuses and heals a target based on the number cleared.

DIVINITY ORIGINAL SIN II'S TRAGICALLY USELESS LUTES BECOME THE BARD'S MAIN WEAPON

Despite my usual aversion to playing a proper healer, I thoroughly enjoyed playing with Lohse's new musical repertoire. Even when I wasn't consciously setting up stacks of buffs or debuffs to abuse, she was able to manage collections of negative statuses inflicted by my enemies and turn them into a boon for the party. She played particularly well off of Ifan the Gravewalker, boosting him with positive statuses and then converting them to healing energy before he could really walk the grave.

One of the best parts of the Bard class mod is that it actually allows them the tools of the trade. *Divinity: Original Sin II*'s tragically useless lutes become the Bard's main weapon. Although Lohse started out with a simple lute made for smashing, she can buy rare lutes from Laslor the Dwarf in Fort Joy, some of which have a chance to inflict negative statuses when used as a melee weapon just like other rare weapons you eventually find in the game. You don't really want your bard fighting at melee range, but it's fun to crack a skull here or there before fleeing the front lines and retreating to safety.

VAMPIRE

I grabbed another of Helaene's mods, the Vampire, because I felt it was a natural fit for Sebille who I originally played as a Shadowblade. Just like the magic-wielding rogues, Sebille's new skills focus on blood and damage. Naturally the class starts by granting the Leech talent, which heals a character when they step into pools of blood. Yum.

The Vampire class feels like home for a rogue regular like me. Just like my usual Shadowblade opening move Backlash that teleports me behind an enemy, the Stalk skill for a vampire lets me flank and gives me a single turn of invisibility to boot. It comes as a slightly higher cost – three action points in total to Stalk an enemy and then use the bleed-inducing Slash skill – but the added benefit of vanishing from view is nice.

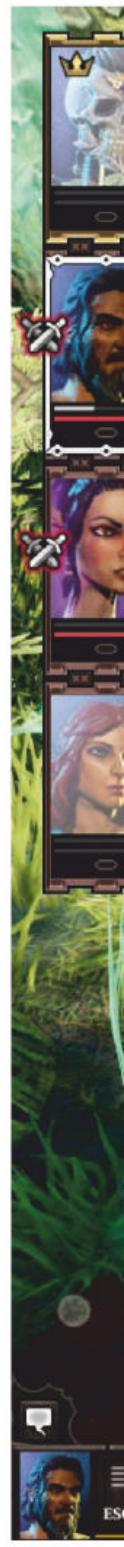
As another bonus, reaching certain levels will let you choose new Vampire abilities, some handy for exploring and others for combat. At level six in particular, you can choose between Psychokinesis which allows you to teleport another entity and damage it, Levitate for making yourself temporarily immune to ground surfaces, and Always Invited which unlocks doors and chests with your vampire mind.

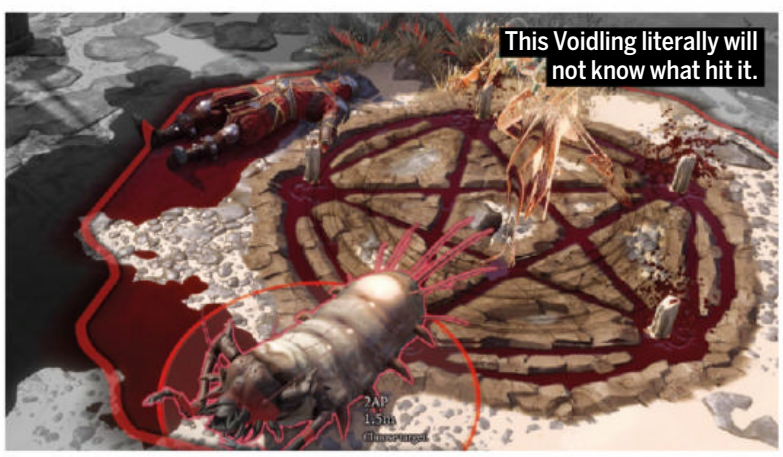
Further into the Vampire skill line, you have access to even more frightening blood abilities. You can Exsanguinate enemies to damage them, knock them out for a turn, and then weaken them for three turns after that. The ability Turn grants Vampirism to another character, prolonged by any kills they make while under the effects.

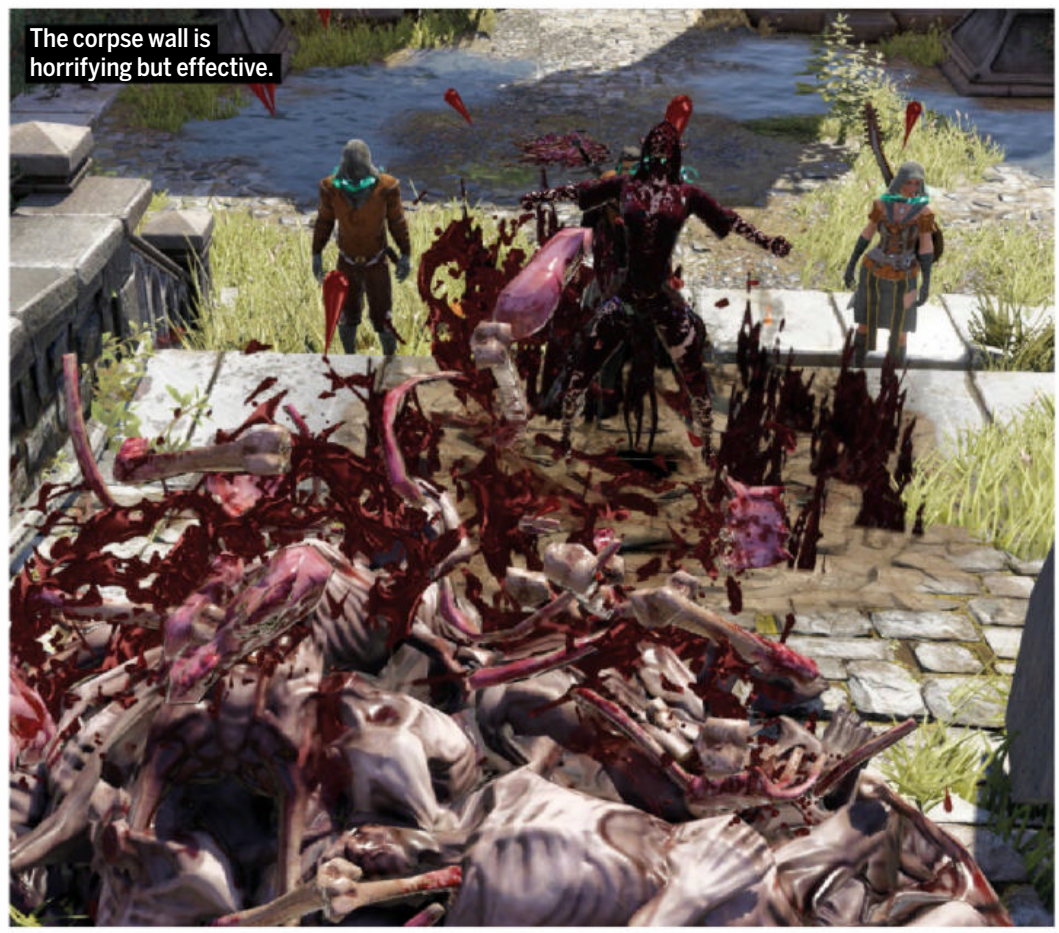
The late-level skill Bloody Barricade in particular is my kind of skill. A hill full of corpses blocks your enemies' path, lasting only two turns but opening all sorts of possibilities for tactical blockades. As a tradeoff though, the cooldown is eight turns, meaning you're only likely to unleash it once during a fight.

The Vampire class is probably the one I'm most likely to keep around for an entire playthrough, dancing the line between familiar and fresh that I find enticing in a class mod.

Divinity: Original Sin II's combat is all about experimentation and finding fun new ways to combine your party's talents. The healthy selection of modded classes for the *Definitive Edition* of the game open clever new possibilities for a new playthrough. They certainly show that tinkerers won't be dry for ideas if *Baldur's Gate III* ends up getting modding tools to play with. ■




This Voidling literally will not know what hit it.


The corpse wall is horrifying but effective.

The Gravewalker class adds enemies who are also Banished From Death.
Ifan ben-Mezd
DECOMPOSING SWASHBUCKLER
0/32
21/21
191/192
Level 4
Banished from Death
Slowed
Stunned
95%
2AP
YOUR TURN
END TURN

RECONNECT AMERICA IN DEATH STRANDING

Excel in your career as a post-apocalyptic postman. *By Harry Shepherd*

NEED TO KNOW

DIFFICULTY
Easy

TIME
40 Hours

VITAL LINKS
Backpack tips:
bit.ly/3234de9
Prepper locations:
bit.ly/38DU7Id
BT guide:
bit.ly/3iHaG4e

TUNNEL VISION

1 If you're tempted to save the main missions until you've completed all available side deliveries, don't. Sticking with the central story until at least chapter three will give you important gear that'll make the side stuff much easier to complete.

REST STOP

2 From keeping you upright as you stroll to protect your precious cargo to giving the energy to escape BTs or Mules, stamina is extremely important. You can top it up by resting in a private room or drinking from your canteen.

WELL SPOTTED

3 Make good use of your binoculars, especially when you're about to traverse a troublesome area so you can plan the safest route. Use the rangefinder to measure cliffs and slopes, so you know where to stick a handy ladder or rope.

EXPERT EFFICIENCY

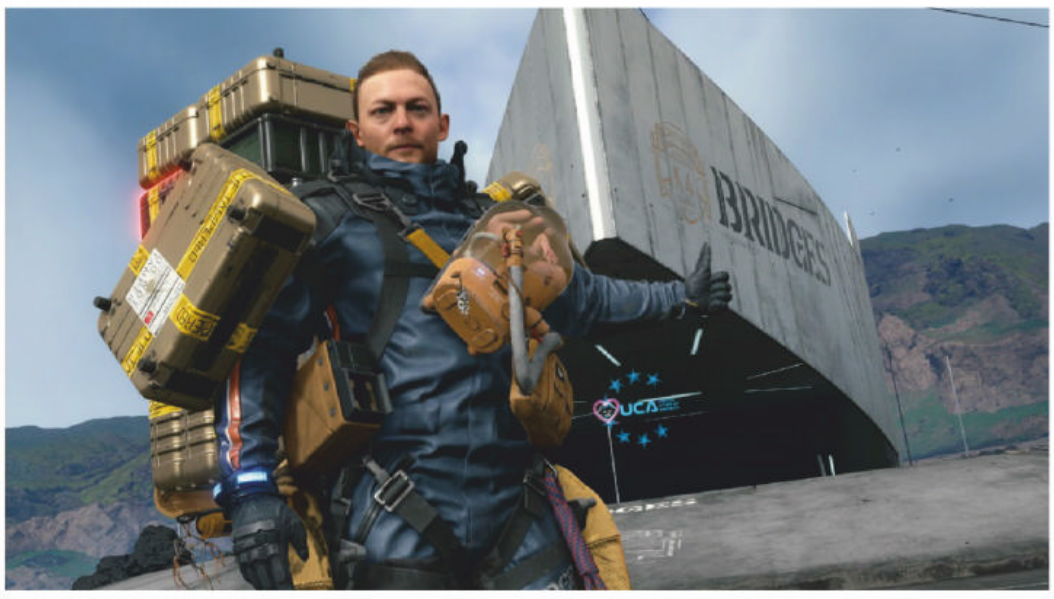
4 To minimise your time spent covering old ground, always check the available deliveries in the area where you completed your last one. That way you can take on jobs on the path to your next major objective and save time without lots of backtracking.

FAST TRAVEL

5 The quickest way to get around is by fast travelling, which you unlock in chapter three when you move from the Eastern to Central Region. Use Fragile's umbrella on the wall in your room to fast travel.

VIRAL CONTENT

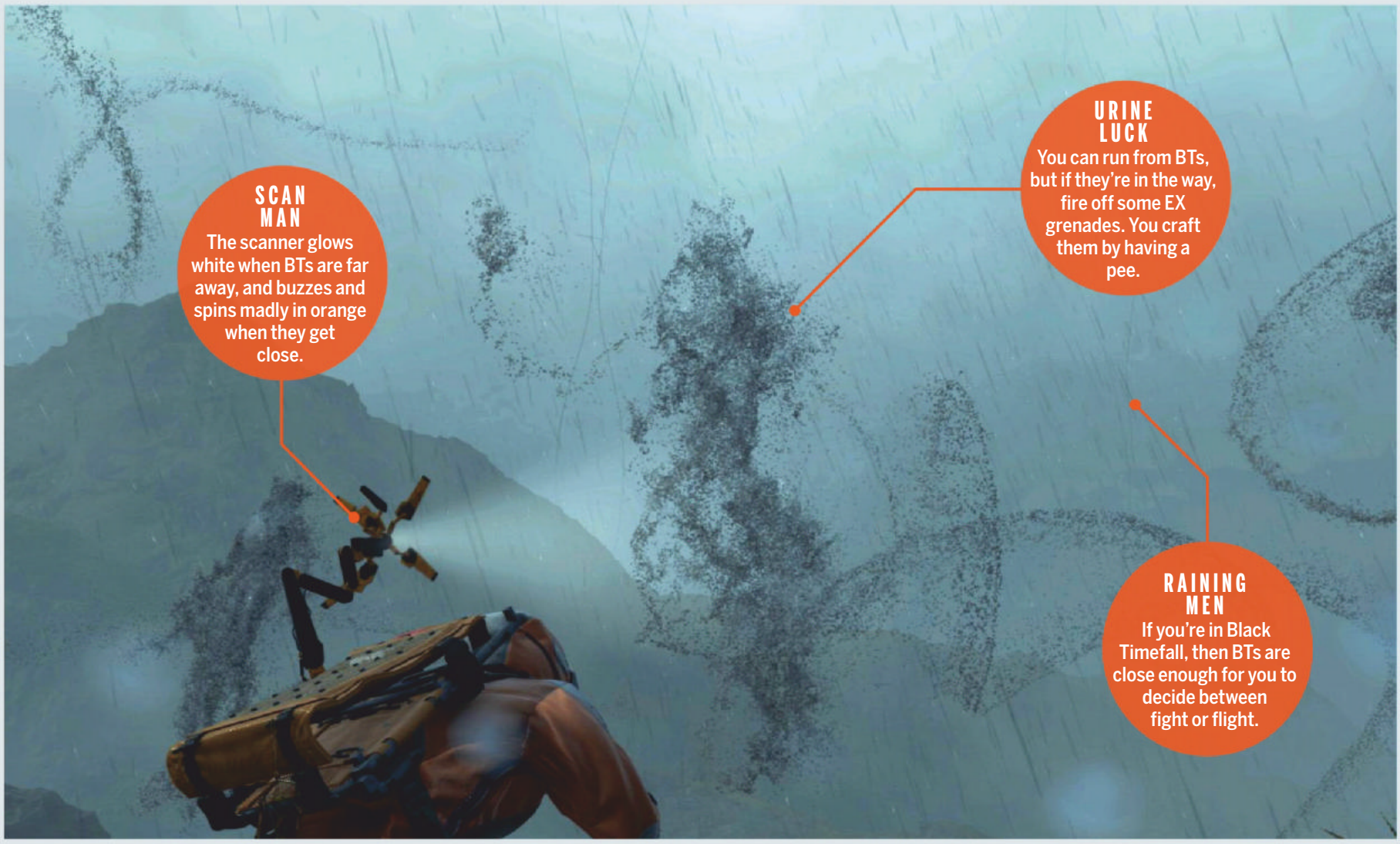
6 You earn likes as you interact with *Death Stranding* and its systems, they determine your level, stats, and abilities. Earn them by creating used structures like roads and bridges.



STRAND ACCOUNT

7 Bridge Links show you a list of players who've created structures that have appeared in your world. You should 'favourite' your most useful collaborators by forming Strand Contracts – that way you'll come across more of their constructions.

BT-'EM-UP *How to tackle the spectral, tar-covered Beached Things*



HOARDING HELP

8 You might not have noticed with everything in your pack, but empty containers from used items stay on you and contribute to your carry weight. Either drop what you don't need or recycle the materials at any facility terminal.

BALANCING ACT

9 Use 'Auto Arrange' in the Cargo Management menu to quickly optimise your balance and get the best star rating for your jobs. Also ensure your more precious stock is covered up by something else to protect it from Timefall.

PREPPER SPRAY

10 When it comes to longer hikes, make sure you're packing Repair Spray. This magical liquid reverses the damaging, time-accelerating effects of Timefall on your cargo, so make sure you've got plenty of it to keep your clients happy.

SHARING IS CARING

11 Check the Share Locker at every terminal you come across. Here you'll find cargo other players no longer want to deliver or have lost. Deliver it to earn likes and increase your Prepper rank if its destination is on your way.

LEVEL PLAYING FIELD

12 If you need to offload your gear temporarily for any reason, make sure you do so on level ground. If you don't, your stock will roll down any decline on which you're standing, and it could get lost.

SOLAIRE'S TRAGIC ENDING

Pour one out for *Dark Souls'* real hero. ***By James Davenport***

LEFT: Not the exact kind of light we were looking for, but...

Whether you've played *Dark Souls* or not, you've likely seen the image of a gallant knight with a stern-faced sun on his chest, his arms outstretched towards the sun like he's trying to give it a big hug. "Praise the sun!" His iconic tagline, beaming optimism and effervescent joy might be the most eminent iconography to come out of a series otherwise defined by its dying world and oppressive difficulty.

This giant goofball, Solaire of Astora, is arguably the point of *Dark Souls*. He's a human-shaped reminder that other people are all we have. It's Solaire that introduces *Dark Souls*' summoning feature and Solaire that encourages the player to "engage in jolly cooperation!".

Solaire's presence is why I so often rally against the 'get good' ethos that so many misguided *Dark Souls* players cling to. *Dark Souls* is meant to be a challenge, and that challenge is meant to nudge players towards humility, freedom from the selfish ego that clouds judgement and keeps us isolated from one another. *Dark Souls* is only difficult in the way that scheduling therapy is difficult. No one should have to face any challenge alone.

And Solaire is due an appointment, losing hold of his infallible optimism before long. He continually seeks his 'sun' or higher purpose, but loses steam when you encounter him at the bonfire just before entering Lost Izalith. "Why, why after all this searching I still cannot find it?" he says.

It's a very familiar question. And I ask it often! Most people do. What's the point of it all? And further down the line, once it is understood the bedrock of human history is built on an endless, iterative cycle of violence and suffering: why are we even alive in the first place?

FAST FRIENDS

Most Dark Souls *characters die horribly*

BIG HAT LOGAN
Seeking: Knowledge
Killed by: Forbidden knowledge

SIEGMEYER OF CATARINA
Seeking: Adventure
Killed by: His daughter

DEEP DEPRESSION

Between a global pandemic forcing me inside and staring at a bright screen all day for work (I do love the job, but my eyes sure don't), between calculating the decades it'll take me to climb out of debt and maybe, potentially, purchase a van one day just so I have somewhere to sleep between inflated studio apartment leases, I'm having a hard time finding my own sun.

It feels like there's a new tragedy or injustice to throw on the pile every day, to weigh against my ability to cope or affect change, and I'm tired. Solaire, slumped over that bonfire, lost and losing hope? I don't know that I've ever identified with a videogame character more. Someone make a beer mod and crack a cold one open for him. Our guy is about to have a very bad day.

Fail to open a certain door from a certain side and kill all the parasites hopping around, and Solaire will end up with one of the nasty bugs as a perma-hat. No amount of praising the sun can help. That's the system (of brain parasites in an analogue for hell), man. He's such a pitiful sight, milling around in the dark alone and so far from home.

"I am the sun!" he says. And then he charges, moaning in pleasure. He's a man rendered from pure ego, a meat puppet whose sole purpose is to subdue other specimens and create more meat puppets, ad infinitum. Sounds like a couple of people that I know. What a life! The most optimistic character in a drained hell world losing hope and, wilfully or not, embracing the parasite sucking on his head and controlling his mind is some extreme 2020 energy. I get it though. It's like letting someone else take the wheel while I feel the breeze in my hair for a change.

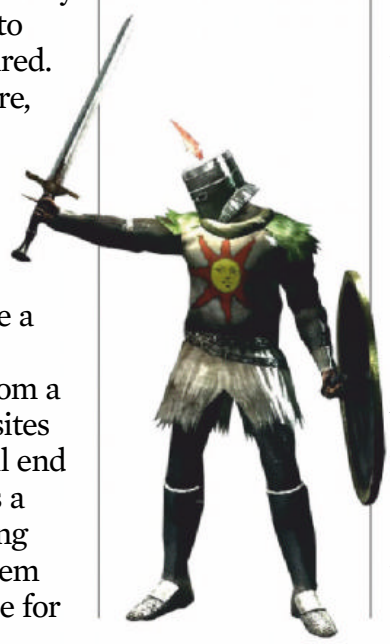
But then Solaire dies, terrified of the encroaching darkness as the false light of the parasite fades.

FIGHTING THROUGH IT

I love this ending not because I want it for Solaire, but because it's a call to action. *Dark Souls* confronted me with the worst case scenario, a dark mirror of wasted potential and ignorant bliss, then forced me to strike it down. I had to take action. I had to say "fuck that" with a massive sword. It's a protest against giving what little will we have to imposed interests and an acknowledgement of the irreconcilable tension between hope and despair. That's just the way it is. But it doesn't mean we can't engage in jolly cooperation on our collective trip to the abyss.

I won't go down like Parasite Solaire, that's for certain. I'll save him and bring him around for the final boss in the next playthrough, whether I let the flame die out or usher in a new age. By sticking around and sticking together, at least we have something like a say in what happens next. ■

SOLAIRE'S PRESENCE IS WHY I SO OFTEN RALLY AGAINST THE 'GET GOOD' ETHOS



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August 24, 2012

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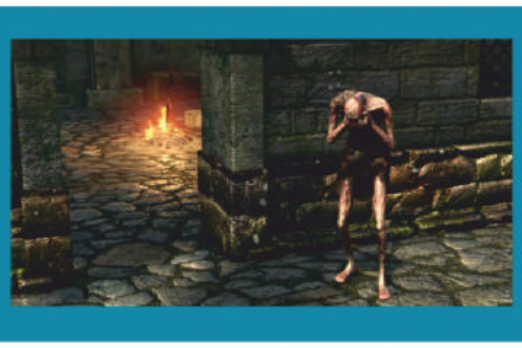


LEFT: Praise the pale, hot, indifferent sun.

HEROQUEST

I'll use my broadsword. *By Jody Macgregor*

I don't feel nostalgia for many things, but when I fire up *HeroQuest* and the music suddenly flips into Golden Brown (imagine being a composer, told you only have 30 kilobytes for your entire musical score and thinking, "Cool, that means I can fit this harpsichord solo by The Stranglers in"), I feel a full-blown Proustian rush.

The ad for the board game version of HeroQuest has the same effect. Like a whole generation of baby dorks I saw those kids saying "I'll use my broadsword" and "Fire of Wrath!" and immediately asked my parents to buy it for me when Christmas rolled around. Then I played it with my parents, my friends and my babysitter until everyone was thoroughly bored. Even my babysitter didn't want to play it any more, and she was paid to spend time with me. I kept playing by myself, keeping the board set up on a tiny table for one under the stairs, controlling all the monsters as well as a full suite of four heroes. Now that I think about it this is actually quite a depressing memory.

TABLE TALK

What was great about the board game was that it came with such an excellent set of dungeon furniture and miniatures. That manic, grinning goblin is still the first thing I think of when goblins show up as level-one enemies in any game. The one-eyed fimir, right out of Warhammer, looked like a Ray Harryhausen monster. I still have a bunch of the plastic skeletons and mummies, which later became the core of an undead team in tabletop fantasy sports game Blood Bowl. The cards were lovely too, with their dopey, overconfident adventurers who've just cast Rock Skin or swigged a potion of strength.

Once you sat down to play it the game was really nothing special. Sometimes you'd roll to move and have one of those turns where you can't get anywhere and just have to say, "I search for secret doors and traps," and the Evil Wizard player would look at the map and say, "There are no secret doors or traps here." (HeroQuest was one of those games where, as the kid who owned it and knew the rules, you'd have to be the bad guy and never get to actually play one of those rad heroes on the cover.) Some of the quests were a bit rubbish too, like the one where every door randomly teleported you to a different room. Honestly, to hell with that.

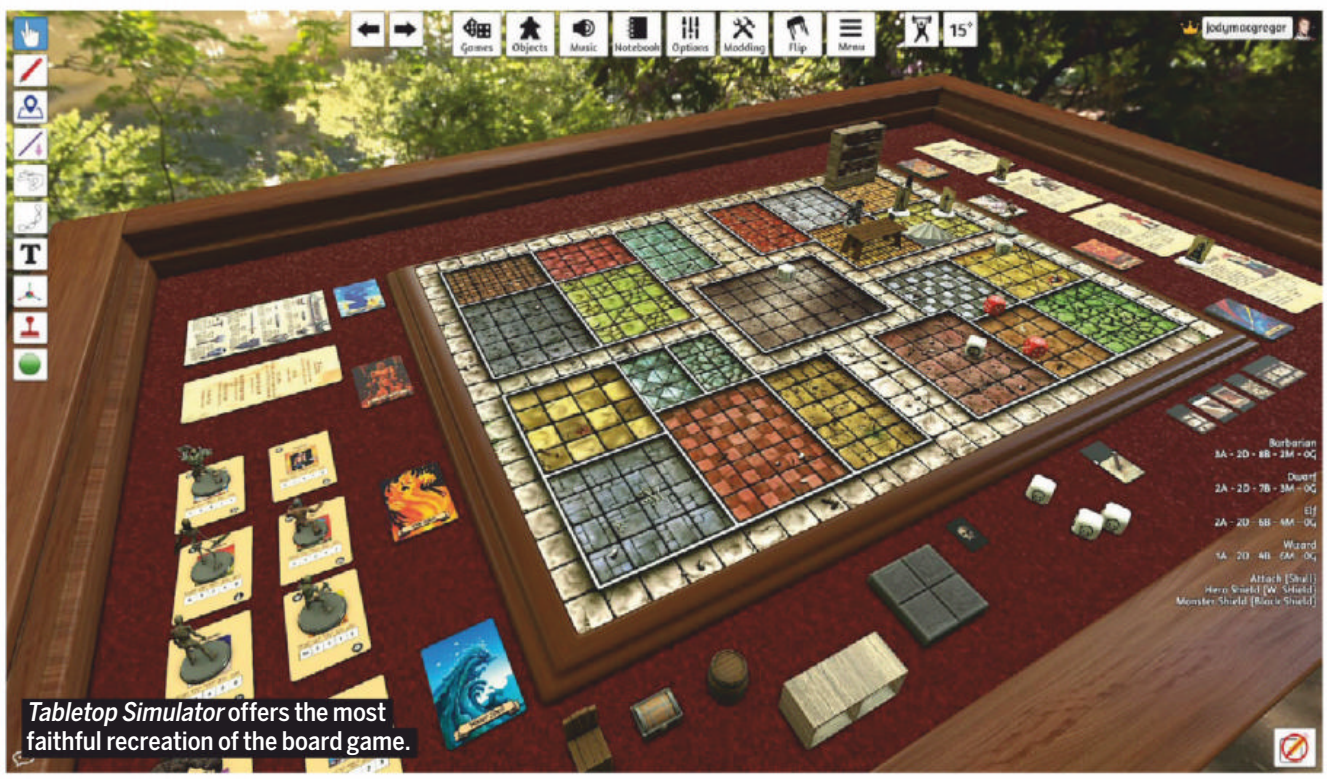
NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED
1991

DEVELOPER
Gremlin Interactive

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
english.yeoldeinn.com



Tabletop Simulator offers the most faithful recreation of the board game.

1991's *HeroQuest* has charm, but not much else going for it.

Isometric HeroQuest is almost right, but somehow wrong?

Gremlin Interactive's 1991 videogame version keeps all of the worst things about HeroQuest and adds a few more. It has fewer equipment cards, so your wizard can't buy a cloak of protection, and the AI is so daft it won't even follow you to another screen.

Those screens are tiny, only depicting one room or hallway – sometimes just a dinky three squares of dungeon. If one of the other heroes is standing on the edge of a transition between screens, finding the spot to click so you can move past them is a huge hassle. There are a lot of traffic jams.

The characters look ridiculous too, the barbarian a muscular toddler who waddles about like his diapers are full. The Amiga version was animated better but had fewer colours to work with, everything sprayed lurid purple like a psychedelic grape juice explosion. And that music I like so much? You can only have it or the sound effects on, not both at once.

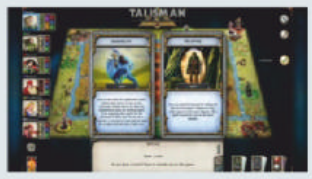
Every quest ends the same way, with a march across the map to get to the stairs and out. All the monsters are dead, all the rooms have been searched, but Johnny Barbarian Hero here wandered off to explore the far corner of the map and now has to spend several minutes rolling-and-moving his way to the exit. The wanker.

THE AI IS SO DAFT IT WON'T EVEN FOLLOW YOU TO ANOTHER SCREEN

I had forgotten about this until now, but back when I was playing the board game with my friends I'd let them finish the quest and collect their rewards without having to walk all the way back to the exit because that's boring. I took that spirit of ignoring the rules when they got in the way of the fun with me when I started running RPGs like Warhammer Fantasy Role-Play for that same group of friends. So thanks for that, HeroQuest.

ON A ROLL

Classic GW tabletop games available in digital form



TALISMAN: DIGITAL EDITION

An adaptation of Games Workshop's other classic RPG board game – though based on Fantasy Flight Games' 2000s reboot, rather than the 1983 version.

CHAINSAW WARRIOR

I'm not sure anyone was actually crying out for a digital version of this 1987 post-apocalyptic solo board game, but here we are. It's even got a sequel.

WARHAMMER COMBAT CARDS

The 1980s card battler was barely more than Top Trumps with photos of miniatures on the cards, but it too has enjoyed new life as a phone game.

Warhammer Quest evokes much of the same spirit.

A thrilling combat.

When I was 12 years old the weaknesses of HeroQuest didn't bother me much and honestly they're minor annoyances now. I still manage to have a good time with it because all I want to do is roll dice and cast Fire of Wrath and use my broadsword. It's admirably simple, letting you play any quest in any order, with an old-fashioned belief you can be relied on to find your own way through rather than having to be guided by unlocks, and there's no levelling-up to worry about. You don't have to kill every monster for the experience points because there aren't any, and can just walk past if you can't be bothered fighting them. Jog on, Mr Chaos Warrior, I've got a Talisman of Lore to find.

The other thing to note about *HeroQuest* is that it's very clearly designed for hotseat multiplayer, up to four kids sharing a keyboard and mouse with the Evil Wizard automated. It existed to let children like me be the elf for once, and that's all it had to do.

For a full modern digital HeroQuest experience you can play online there's *Tabletop Simulator*, which has at least two implementations in the Steam Workshop, one a fancy version full of accurate 3D models for playing pieces and a fantasy tavern backdrop. The other one is a little more basic, though with animated monsters borrowed from another mod and a forest setting for an outdoor board game vibe. Neither's what I actually want, of course. What I want is to be able to play by myself but with slightly more modern controls than a game that's from 1991.

I turn to Lurchbrik's *Isometric HeroQuest* next, an extremely competent fan game available for free, which should be perfect for me. But it's based on the American version of the board game, which has slightly different rules, and 3D models that don't look like the actual heroes and monsters. It's just different enough to the game I grew up with that it doesn't set off those pleasant memories, while the much more flawed official version from 1991 still does. What a ridiculous emotion nostalgia is.

Fortunately, there's yet another option. The HeroQuest board game

VILLAINQUEST

The best of the bad guys

SKELETON
The Grim Reaper, but nude.

FIMIR
He works out. Also has a tail.

GOBLIN
Just an ugly face on a tiny body.

GARGOYLE
Rarely seen but tough as nails.

The fanciest recreation *Tabletop Simulator* has to offer.

LOW-RENT HEROES SCRAMBLING FOR CRAP REWARDS IN DIRTY DUNGEONS

was followed by Advanced HeroQuest, and then a whole line of Warhammer Quest games. The videogame version of the first Warhammer Quest, made by Rodeo Games and released in 2015, is thoroughly decent. It gives me four heroes exploring dungeons in a turn-based fashion like I want, but with combat that's a bit more tactical than a board game for nine-year-olds.

WARHAMMER TIME

Most fights in *Warhammer Quest* involve my ogre and warrior-priest blocking a doorway while the wizard and elf shoot over them. If you start a turn base-to-base with an enemy there's a chance you'll be pinned in place, so you can rarely rely on mobility to get you out of a jam and have to play defensively, though there's always a chance an ambush will strike at your back line. I give the elf a magic sword and the wizard a stockpile of scrolls to burn through in case goblins launch a surprise attack at their backs.

Between dungeons everyone marches to the next town, each of which assembles itself out of digital papercraft in a nod to its cardboard roots, and also a bit like the Game of Thrones credits. Each rundown hovel presents a new quest in choose-your-own-adventure style. Here in Wurtbad the starving locals want me to bring back their only mule, Old Nell, who was dragged off by a giant spider. I rescue her, turning down an option to waste time grabbing fancy tapestries from the spider's lair because Old Nell might get snacked on while I faff about.

The villagers are grateful, because it's almost festival time and they were out of animals for the feast. I rescued their favourite mule just so they could eat her. But then I'm offered two of Old Nell's haunches as a reward, which turn out to be solid healing items. So I guess we're going to eat her now as well.

These grimy low-rent stories do remind me of something I liked about HeroQuest. It promised "high adventure in a world of magic" but then you'd get treasure cards explaining you found a few coins in a smelly old jerkin, or a single small gem hidden in the toe of a boot. Sometimes you'd find nothing at all, complete with an illustration of a broken-down goober of an adventurer holding out empty hands. The Castle of Mystery, the quest with the teleporting doors, rewarded you with a chest full of gold only to reveal at the end it was fool's gold, completely worthless. In fact so was every bit of gold you found in that dungeon – even the coins in the smelly old jerkin. Pah!

Low-rent heroes scrambling for crap rewards in dirty dungeons, not even earning enough to buy that crossbow they've got their eye on. That's what these games are really about. There are rats on the furniture and the monsters are all slightly more menacing than they need to be for ages nine and up. That's what lingers about the experience of playing HeroQuest in either form – the idea that there's less glamour in heroism than you've been led to expect, and that sometimes you have suck it up and be the player who searches for secret doors and traps. ■

MUST PLAY

A PERSONAL LIST OF THE BEST GAMES YOU CAN PLAY RIGHT NOW

by Robin Valentine

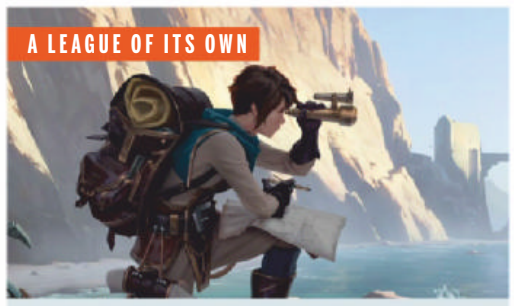
ROBIN VALENTINE

Frankly it's a miracle that I even found the time to play eight more games since the last time I did one of these.

WARHAMMER: VERMINTIDE 2

vermintide.com

I will never stop banging on about this underrated co-op gem. Not only the best modern successor to *Left 4 Dead*, but it also nails the grim silliness of the Warhammer Fantasy setting like no other game. Rich melee combat and pleasing character variety keep me coming back again and again.



LEGENDS OF RUNETERRA

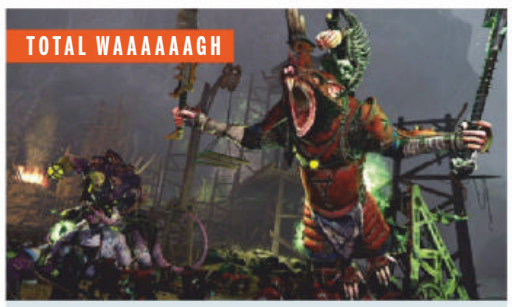
playruneterra.com

Stop making yourself miserable in *Hearthstone* and come play a properly fun CCG where you can build the decks you want to build without emptying your wallet. Matches are clever and exciting, full of brain-teasing back-and-forths. And the business model, doing away with random packs, is a breath of fresh air.

MONSTER TRAIN

themonstertrain.com

Without a doubt *Slay the Spire* is still the king of card-based roguelikes. But if, like me, you've already rinsed 200 hours out of that game, *Monster Train*'s a lovely alternative. It's not as tight or clever, but its over-the-top exuberance is fun in its own right. The art's wacky, and the combos are wackier.



TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER II

totalwar.com

My favourite game that I don't actually enjoy playing very much. I just find its sprawling battles sort of baffling and dull, but I love the intense and nostalgia-soaked attention to detail given to the Warhammer Fantasy setting. Coincidentally I was never any good at the tabletop game either.

MORTAL KOMBAT 11

mortalkombat.com

Wonderfully ridiculous storytelling and absurd gore provide the perfect set-dressing for accessible brawls that blend brutality and measured, tactical thinking. Even someone as slow-witted and clumsy-fingered as me can just about keep up, thanks to detailed tutorials and brilliantly mashable combos.

PERSONA 4 GOLDEN

atlus.com

A weird case where the supernatural elements and dungeon crawling are actually a bit of a slog, and it's the mundane day-to-day stuff that's the utterly spellbinding part. A perfectly evocative and atmospheric slice of Japanese teen life, complete with one of gaming's most lovable casts.

HOLLOW KNIGHT

Hollowknight.com

I completed *Dark Souls*, but it never really grabbed me like it did other people. For foreboding atmosphere, cryptic lore, and the satisfaction of triumphing over a grim and hostile world, I'll take this ambitious indie metroidvania over FromSoftware's efforts any day, and I don't care if that's blasphemy.

HAND OF FATE 2

defiantdev.com/hof2.html

This sequel was unpopular enough that its developer went under not long after its release. But I think its twist on a deckbuilding roguelike, which sees you guiding the twists and turns of an RPG adventure's narrative by picking cards with different story beats and opportunities, is unique and brilliant.

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